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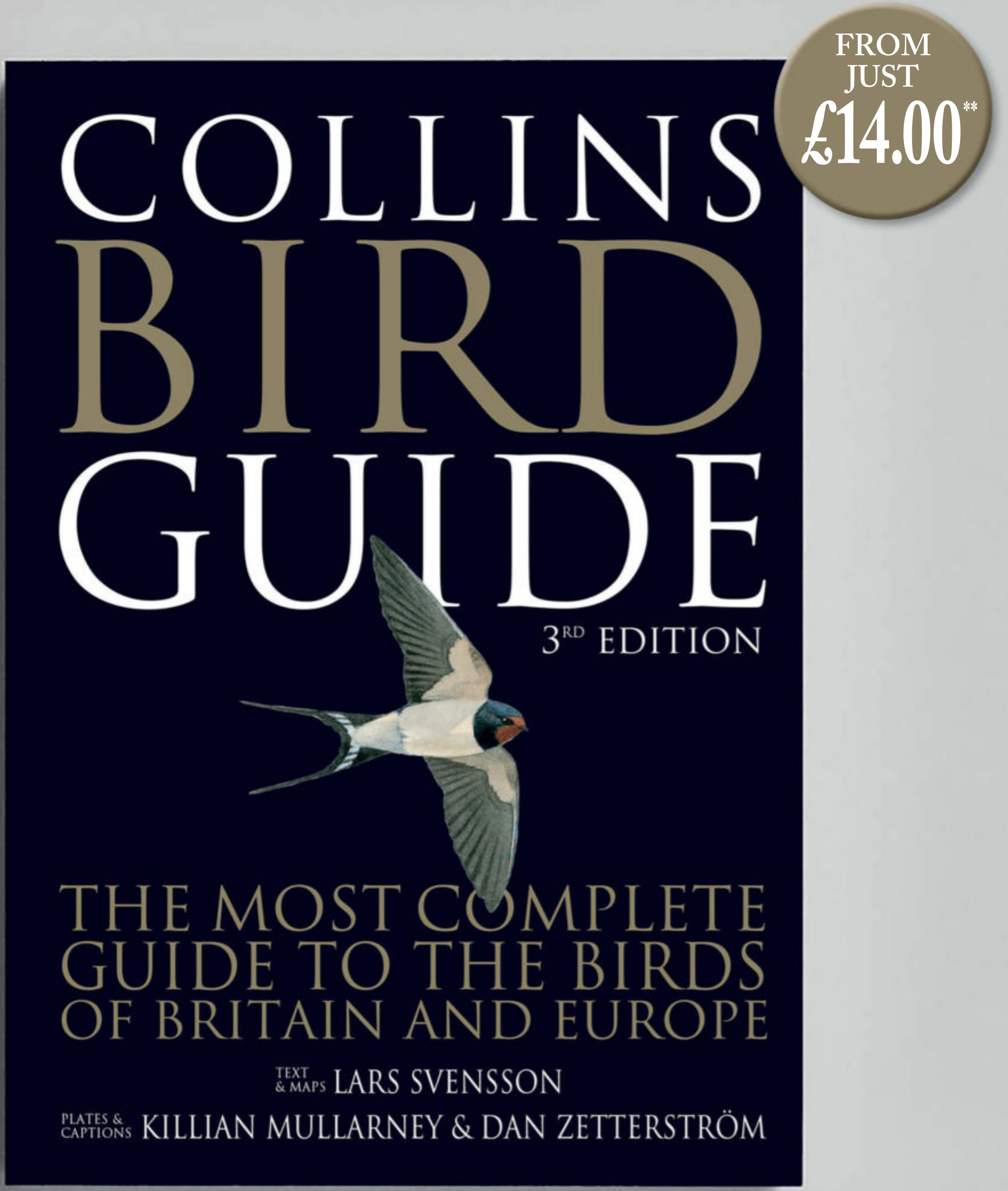
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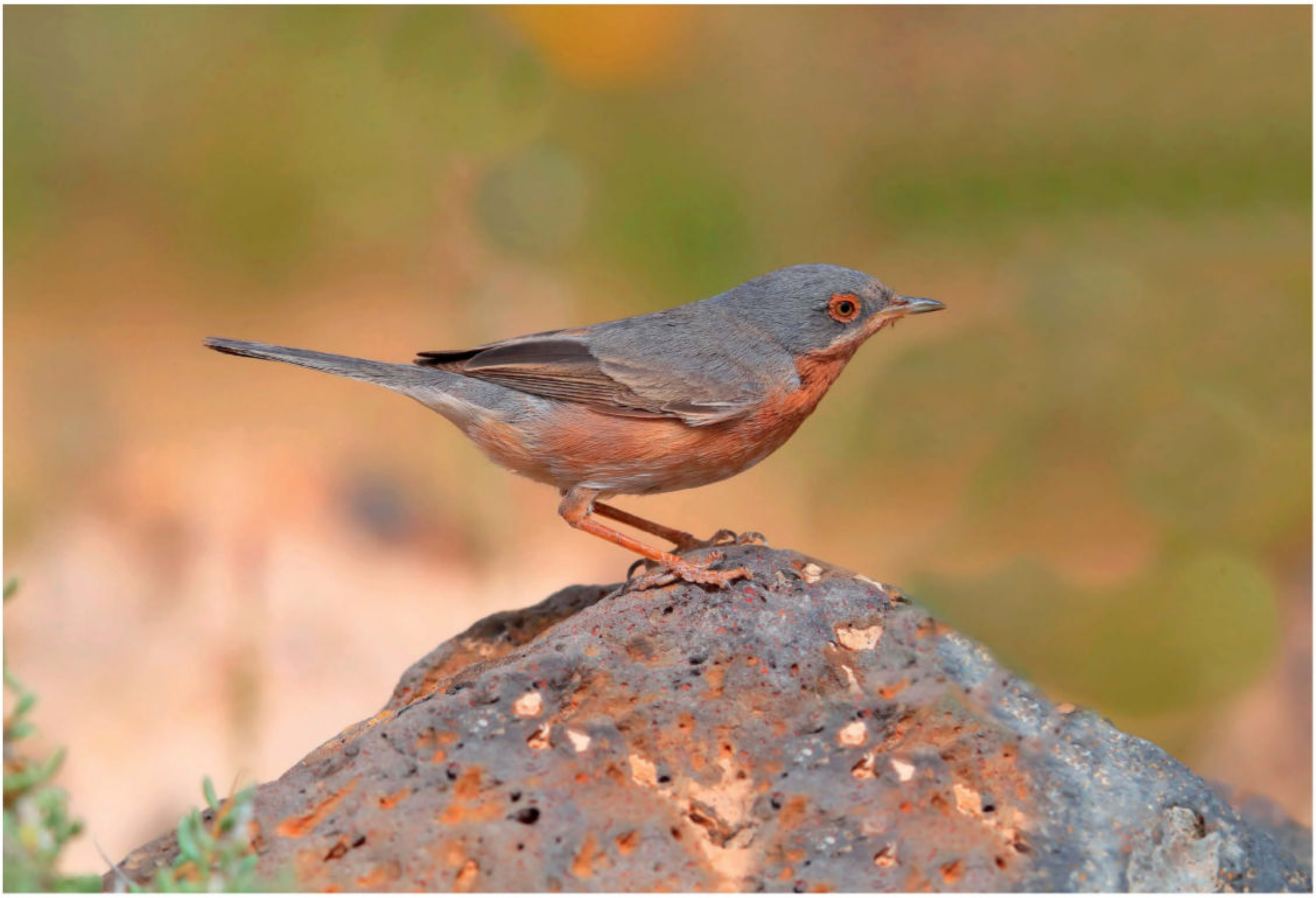
OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

AURELIEN AUDEVARD

# Subalpine Warblers

Words by Andy Stoddart



BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

ONE: Male Western Subalpine Warbler (Fuerteventura, Spain, 25 February 2020). Male subalpine warblers are both beautiful and a challenge. They can be enjoyed simply for their attractive colours or studied more closely to attempt to identify them to species. This bird, photographed in the Canary Islands, will be a Western Subalpine based purely on its location, but the wholly orange-hued underparts support this identification.

A comprehensive taxonomic revision of the subalpine warbler complex concluded that it contains three species-level taxa, with IOC splitting what was previously one species into three: Western Subalpine, Eastern Subalpine and Moltoni's Warblers. All three species have been recorded in the Britain and Ireland, although the third is very rare. While distinctive as a group, identifying the birds to species level is a challenge. Andy Stoddart provides the information you need to recognise these three similar warblers should you be lucky enough to discover one in the field.

# Basic Principles

'Subalpine Warbler' is a delightful small warbler of the Mediterranean region, where it typically favours scrub interspersed with taller bushes on dry slopes. It is a summer migrant, returning in March and April from its winter quarters in Africa.

It has traditionally been treated as a single species, although significant variation in plumage and calls across its range has long been recognised and multiple subspecies have been described. In recent years, these subspecies have come under increasing scrutiny and, assisted by evidence from genetic analysis, their true distinctiveness has been fully revealed.

'Subalpine Warbler' was split by the British Ornithologists' Union's Records Committed (BOURC) in 2014 into two species: Subalpine Warbler (with four subspecies) and Moltoni's Warbler (monotypic). Within the former, two western subspecies were generally grouped together as 'Western Subalpine Warbler', with two eastern subspecies treated as 'Eastern Subalpine Warbler'. These two groupings were then split by the International Ornithological Congress (IOC) in 2020 (with one of the two western subspecies regarded as invalid).

These taxonomic changes have, in turn, required some nomenclatural adjustments, and the whole complex, along with many other former *Sylvia* warblers, has been transferred into the new genus *Curruca*. The 'Subalpine Warbler' complex now comprises three 'cryptic' species, as follows:

- **Western Subalpine Warbler** *Curruca iberiae* (monotypic, breeding in north-west Africa, Portugal, Spain, southern France and the far northwest corner of Italy).
- **Eastern Subalpine Warbler** *Curruca cantillans* (polytypic, comprising two subspecies: nominate *cantillans*, breeding in central and southern mainland Italy and Sicily, and *albistriata*, breeding in the far north-east corner of Italy, the Balkans, Greece and western Turkey).
- **Moltoni's Warbler** *Curruca subalpina* (monotypic, breeding in the Balearic Islands, Corsica, Sardinia and northern mainland Italy).

Subalpine warblers are annual vagrants to Britain in small numbers and are regular enough to represent a highly viable bird-finding target. Most records are in spring (but there are also a good number of autumn birds) and the majority occur in coastal counties, with the south and east coasts (as far north as Shetland) most favoured.

All three of the newly split species occur here, but establishing the numbers of each in the historical record is problematic with many, understandably, not sufficiently documented to be identifiable and so treated simply as 'Subalpine Warbler species'. The official statistics for 1950-2019 show 20 Westerns, 103 Easterns and 10 Moltoni's, as well as 735 unidentified 'Subalpine Warblers'.

These figures are inevitably less than definitive and almost certainly do not give an accurate picture of the relative status of each species. Moltoni's Warbler seems to be genuinely rare, but the true proportions of Western and Eastern Subalpines are likely to be more evenly balanced than the statistics suggest.

Subalpine warblers as a group are relatively easily identified. They are small, a little smaller than a Lesser Whitethroat, and more compact and short tailed, with paler ear coverts and brownish-pink legs.

Spring males are grey above and reddish below (albeit variable in colouration and extent) with red orbital and eyerings and a white submoustachial. Autumn adult males have fresh whitish feather tips in the underparts which partially obscure their colour and make them appear more pink.

Females and first-year birds are dull and brown above and whitish below, slightly greyer around the head, with a reddish orbital ring and whitish eyering. Some adult females in spring have more peachy underparts and can even show a weak white submoustachial.

However, the recent taxonomic developments have led inevitably to greater identification difficulties. As a result, new criteria have had to be developed, previously understood criteria revised and the thresholds for certain identification and official acceptance raised.

A firm identification to species level is now very challenging and only the most distinctive spring males are likely to be identifiable in the field. The British Birds Rarities Committee now requires submissions of males in spring to contain two of the following: details of the underparts colouration, a photograph of the pattern of the second outermost tail feather (T5), and a description or (preferably) a recording of the call. For females and all birds in autumn, submissions should include both the tail pattern details and call. Even so, these features are all somewhat variable and the occasional 'anomalous' individual can be found. In all cases, however, DNA analysis can provide a certain identification.

Inevitably, many 'Subalpine Warblers' will have to remain unidentified to species. Nevertheless, this should not be a deterrent to looking at each one carefully and noting as many features as possible. The currently understood identification criteria for spring males of each species (ranked approximately in order of importance) are as follows:

### Western Subalpine Warbler

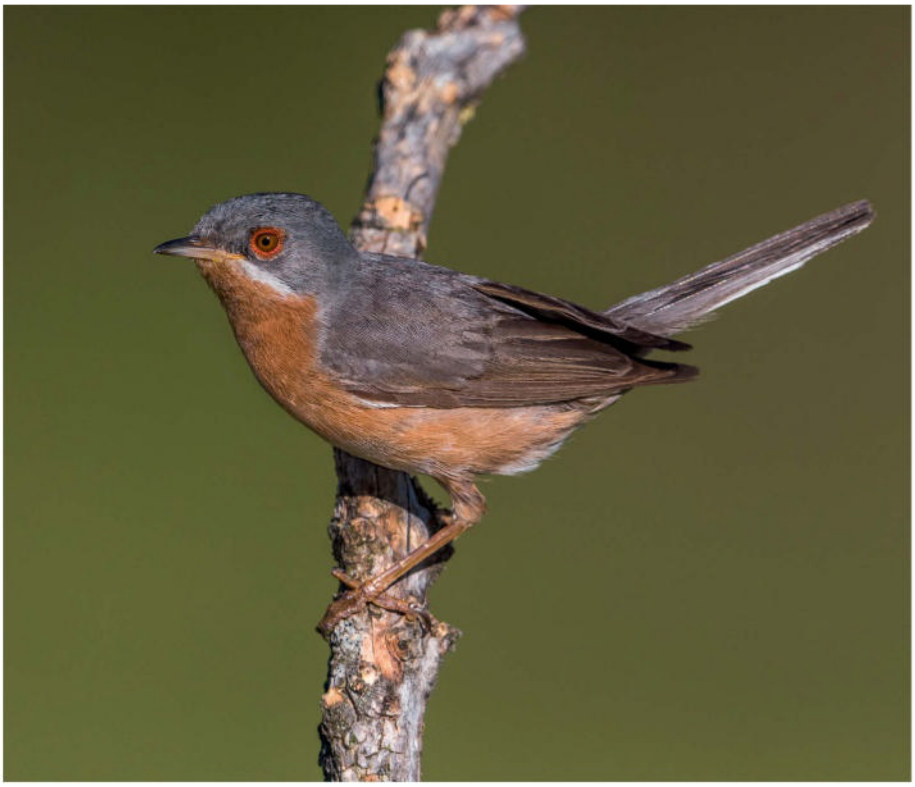
- Underparts extensively warm orange-red, lacking contrast between the throat/breast and the rest of the underparts.
- Call a hard *tack* like Lesser Whitethroat.
- A square white tip to T5.
- Primary projection relatively short and broad, with four to six primary tips visible.
- Usually short and narrow white submoustachial.

### Eastern Subalpine Warbler

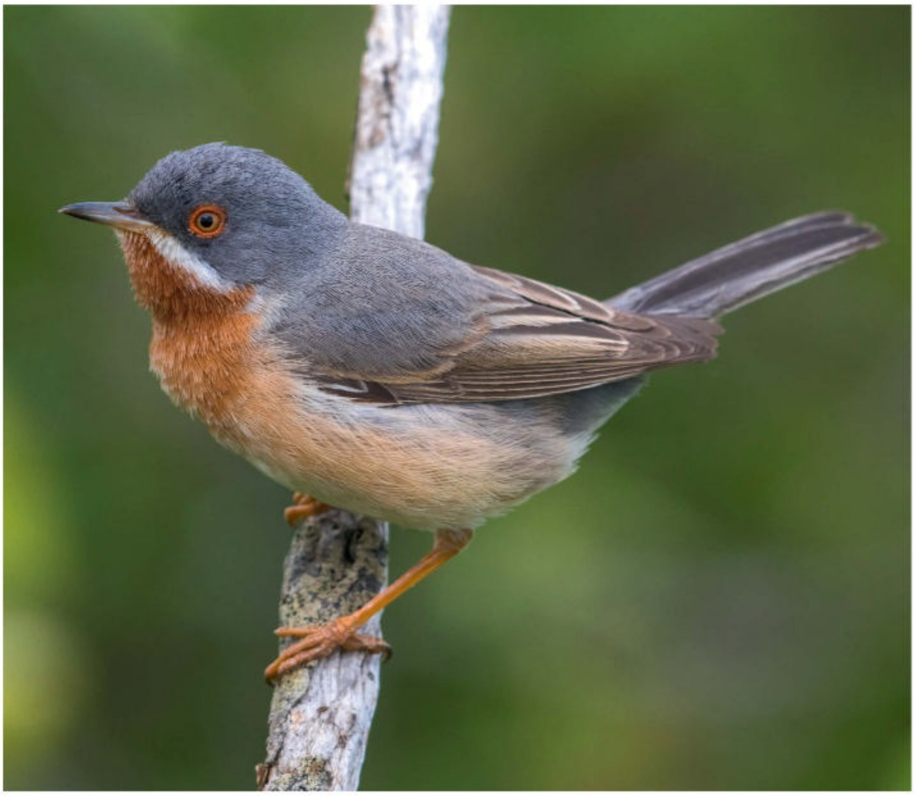
- Underparts orange-red (nominate *cantillans*) or more brownish-red, less orange (*albistriata*), colour a little weaker on flanks (*cantillans*) or sometimes confined to throat (*albistriata*), belly more extensively white.
- Call an abrupt *tek* (*cantillans*) or an often doubled *t-tret* (*albistriata*).
- A narrow white wedge alongside the shaft on the inner web of T5.
- Primary projection relatively long and narrow, with six to seven primary tips visible.
- Usually long and broad white submoustachial

### Moltoni's Warbler

- Underparts extensively salmon-pink or rose-pink, lacking contrast between the throat/breast and the rest of the underparts.
- Call a soft Wren-like rattle.
- A square white tip to T5.
- Usually short and narrow white submoustachial.
- (Primary projection variable and hence not useful).


DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

TWO: Male Western Subalpine Warbler (Provence, France, 3 July 2016). Just as with the bird in image 1, this individual shows wholly orange-hued underparts with no obvious contrast between the throat/upper breast and the rest of the underparts. Other pro-Western Subalpine features are a relatively weak white submoustachial stripe and a short primary projection. Of course, the French location provides further confidence in the identification.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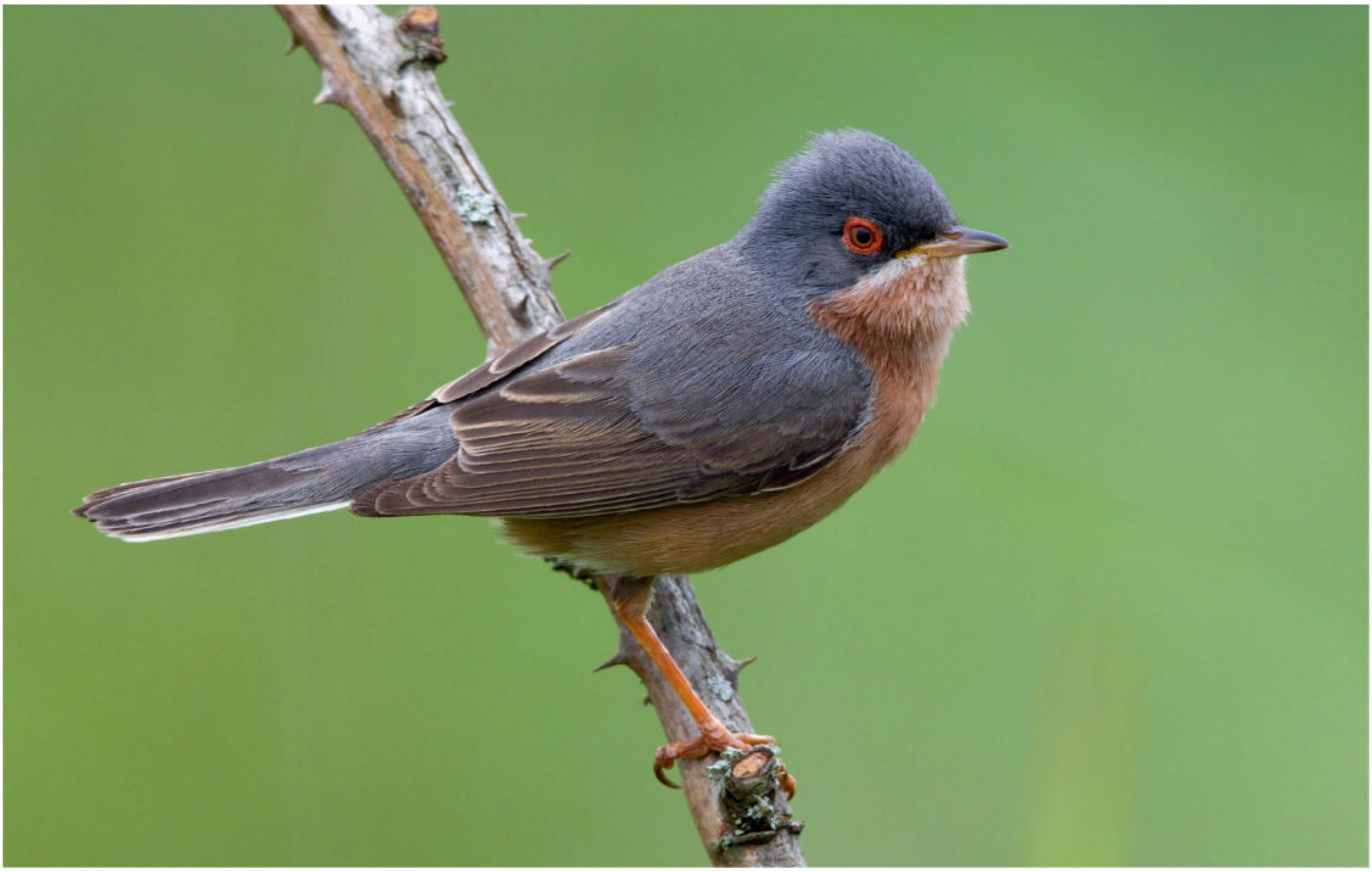
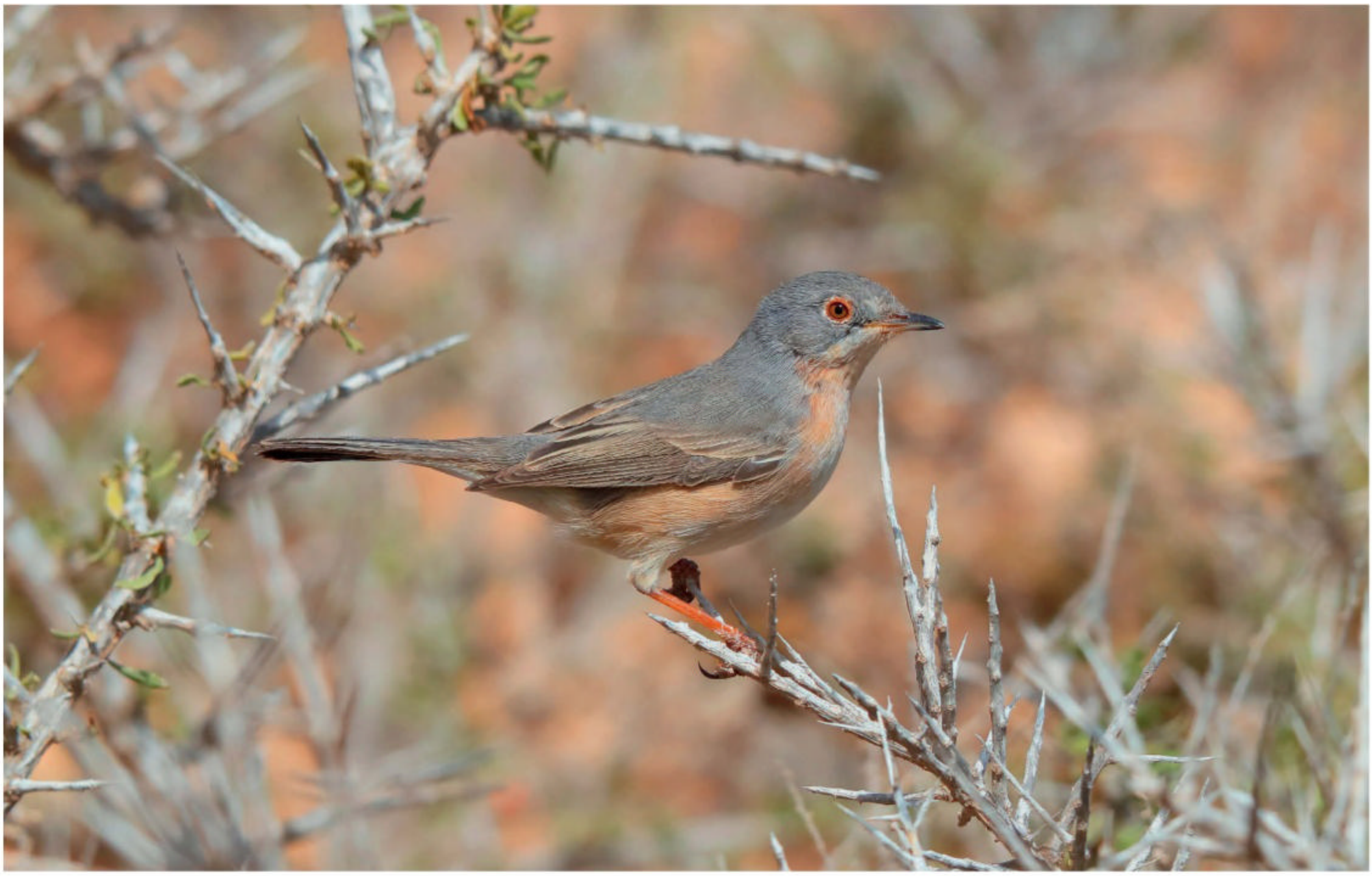
THREE: Male Eastern Subalpine Warbler (Tuscany, Italy, 18 April 2017). This bird differs most obviously from that in image 2 in the strong and quite obvious contrast between the intensity of the colour of the throat/upper breast and that of the flanks, with the former very deeply coloured and the latter only faintly washed. In addition, the underparts are a deeper brown-red, slightly less orange. Further indicators of Eastern Subalpine are the relatively bold white submoustachial stripe and a long-looking primary projection. The known location means that it is possible to assign this bird to the subspecies *cantillans*, an identity also suggested by the weak flush of colour in the flanks.



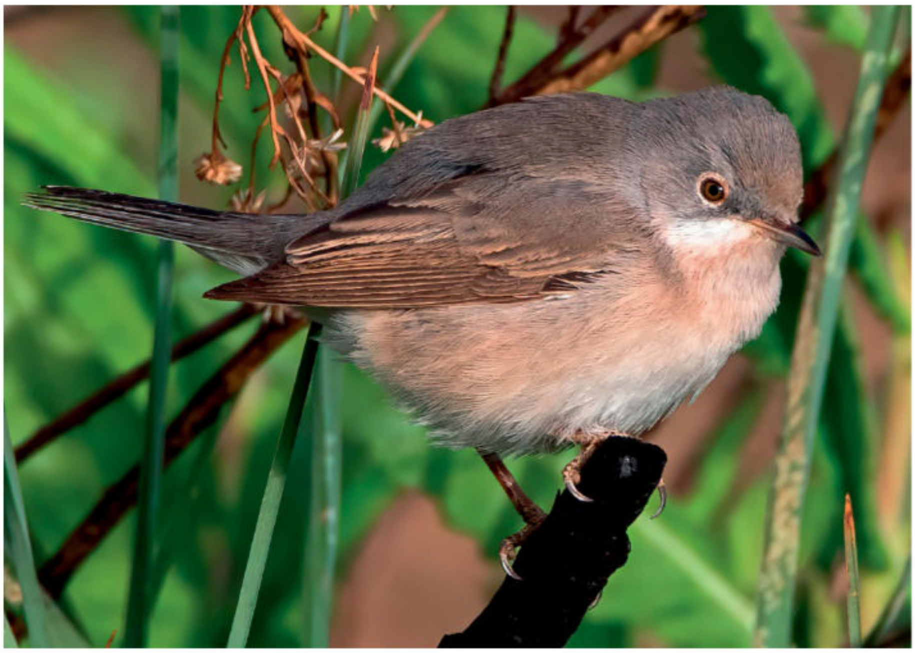
DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FOUR: Male Moltoni's Warbler (Tuscany, Italy, 24 April 2011). The most striking feature of this bird is the salmon-pink or rose-pink colour of the underparts, these also lacking any strong contrast between the throat/upper breast and the flanks. This distinctive colouration suggests Moltoni's Warbler, an identification supported by the relatively weak white submoustachial stripe and, of course, by the Tuscan location, where this species breeds alongside Eastern Subalpine.



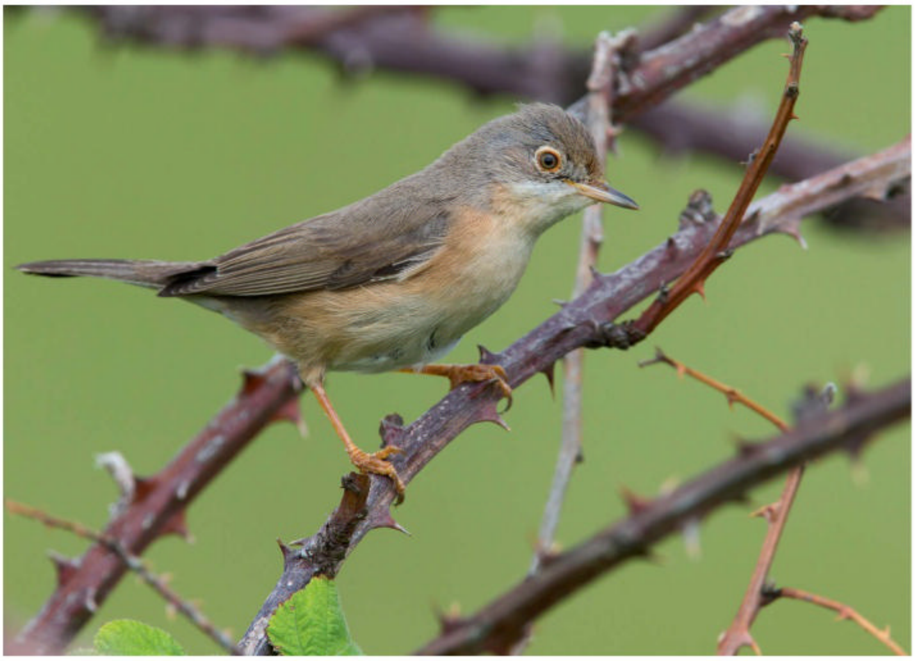
BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

FIVE: Female Western Subalpine Warbler (Fuerteventura, Spain, 25 February 2020). This rather 'washed-out'-looking bird is a bright female with peachy hues extending onto the throat and highlighting a weak pale submoustachial stripe. There are few clues here to its specific identity, but the Canary Islands location indicates that it will almost certainly be a Western Subalpine.



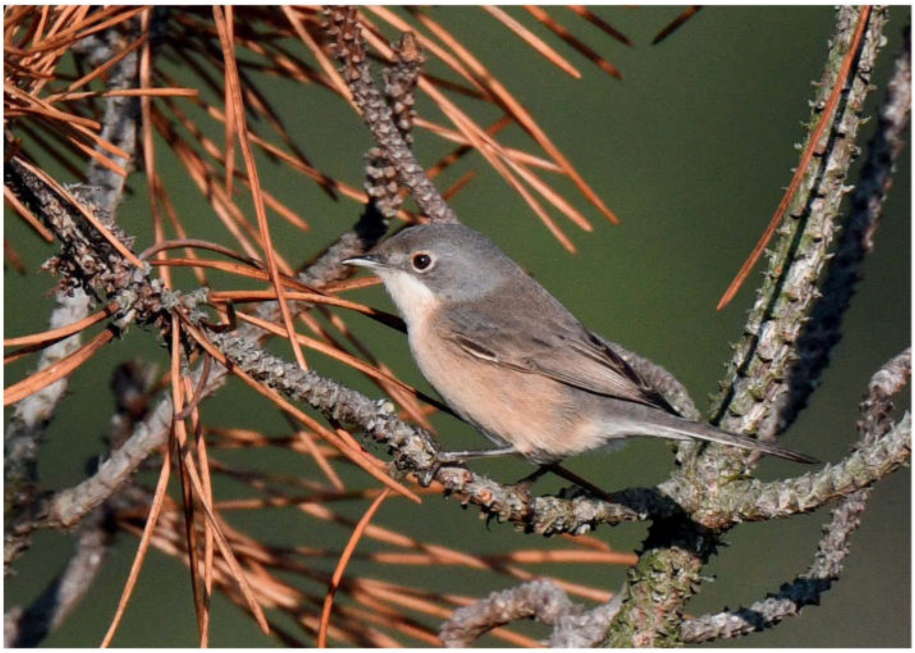
GEORGE RESZETER

SIX: Female Eastern Subalpine Warbler (Anarita, Cyprus, 25 March 2016). This bird shows the typical 'non-adult male' features of the subalpine warbler group: a 'soft', pale face with no darkening in the ear coverts, pale legs, a reddish orbital ring and whitish eyering and peachy hues in the underparts. Identifying it to species from this image is, however, impossible, although the location should provide sufficient confidence that it is an Eastern Subalpine.



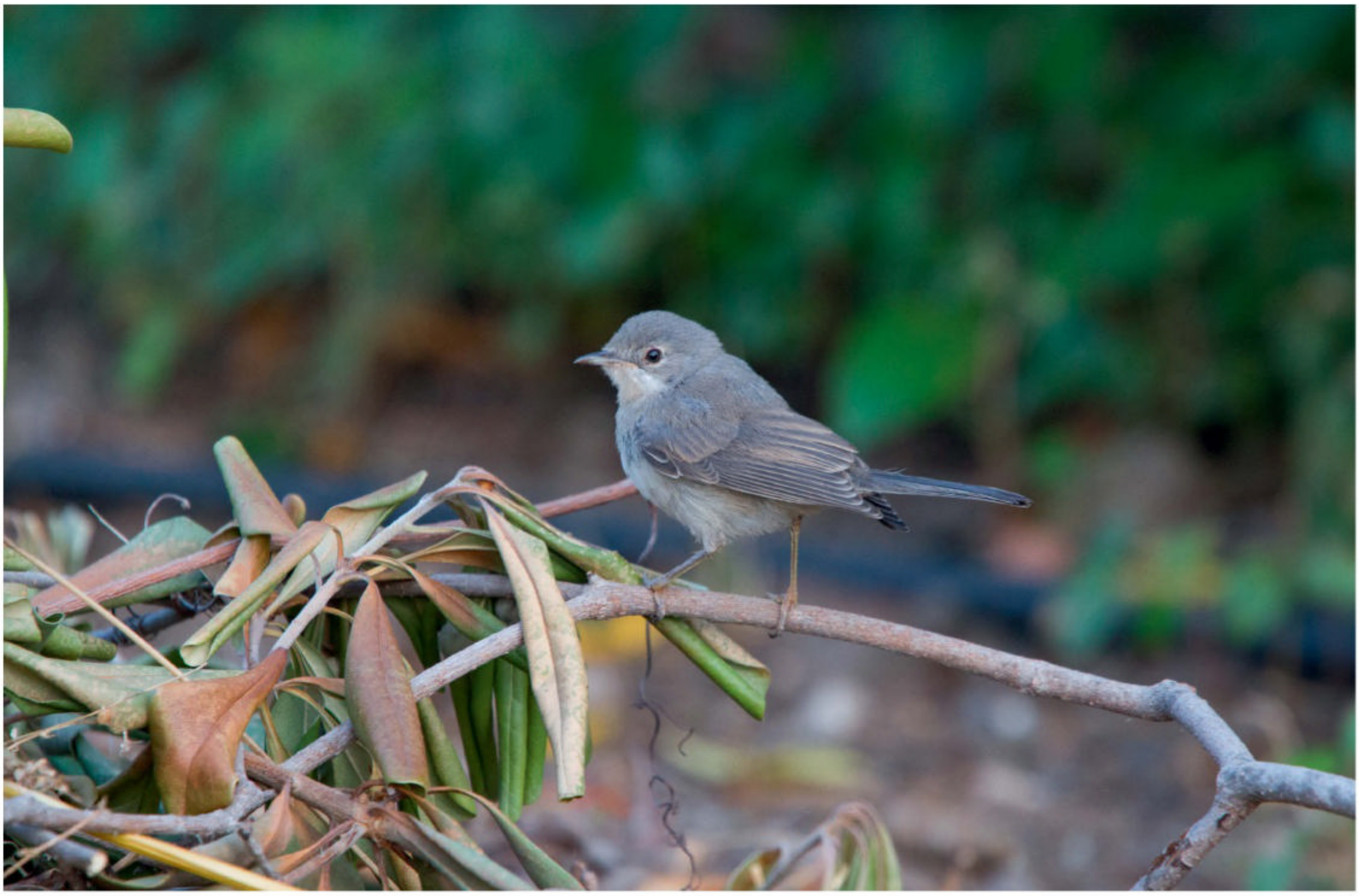
DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

SEVEN: Female Moltoni's Warbler (Pisa, Italy, 23 May 2012). This bird appears very similar to that in image six and is not identifiable to species based on this image alone. However, the photographer tells us that it is a Moltoni's Warbler and it is photographed within the breeding range of that species.



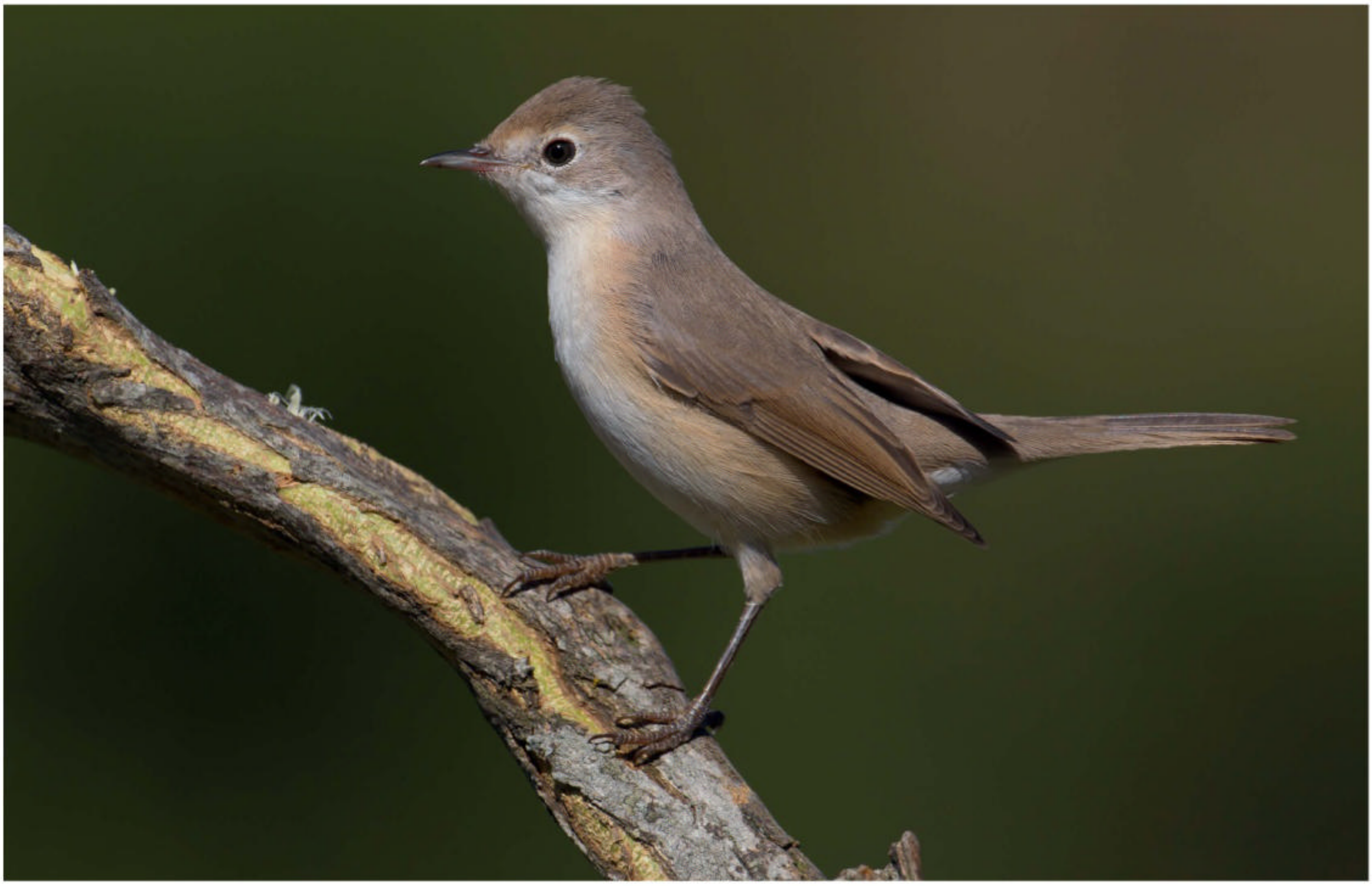
LAURENS STEIJN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

EIGHT: First-winter Western Subalpine Warbler (Portugal, 21 September 2020). This bird has darker legs than the individual in image seven and so looks a little more Lesser Whitethroat-like, but note again the pale ear coverts, reddish orbital ring and white eyering which identify it as a subalpine warbler. Assigning it to species is, however, impossible from this image, although its location helps, making a Western by far the most likely option.



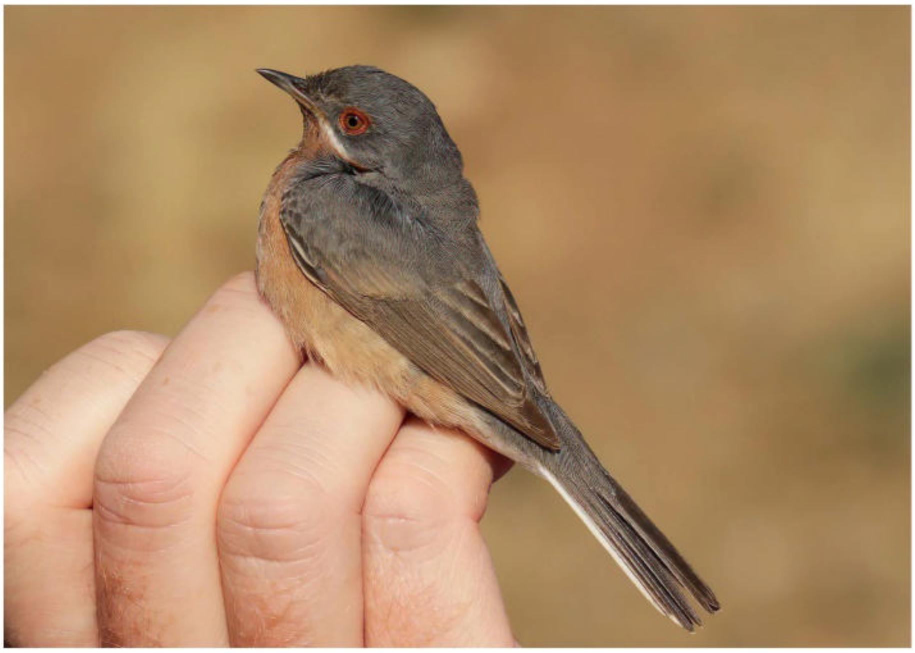
MENNO V AN DUIJN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

NINE: First-winter Eastern Subalpine Warbler (Liguria, Italy, 19 September 2016). Although clearly a subalpine warbler, identifying this bird to species from this image is problematic. The location lies at the meeting point of the ranges of Western Subalpine and Moltoni's Warblers, but the range of Eastern Subalpine is not far away and the photographer has labelled it as this species.



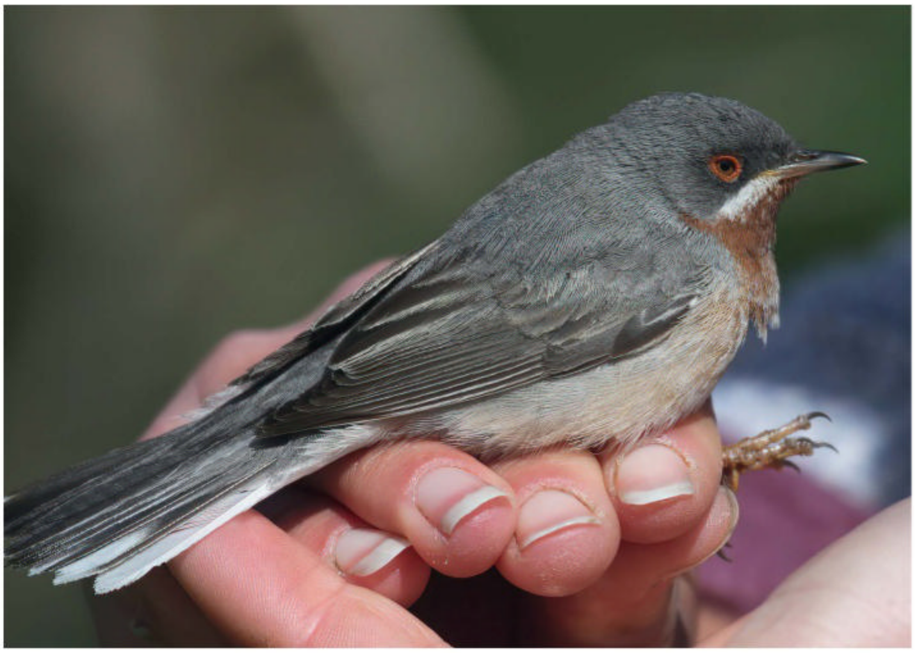
DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

TEN: First-winter Moltoni's Warbler (Tuscany, Italy, 2 September 2010). This rather plain-looking and dark-legged young bird is again not identifiable to species from this image, but the photographer has identified it as Moltoni's Warbler and the location lies within the breeding range of that species.



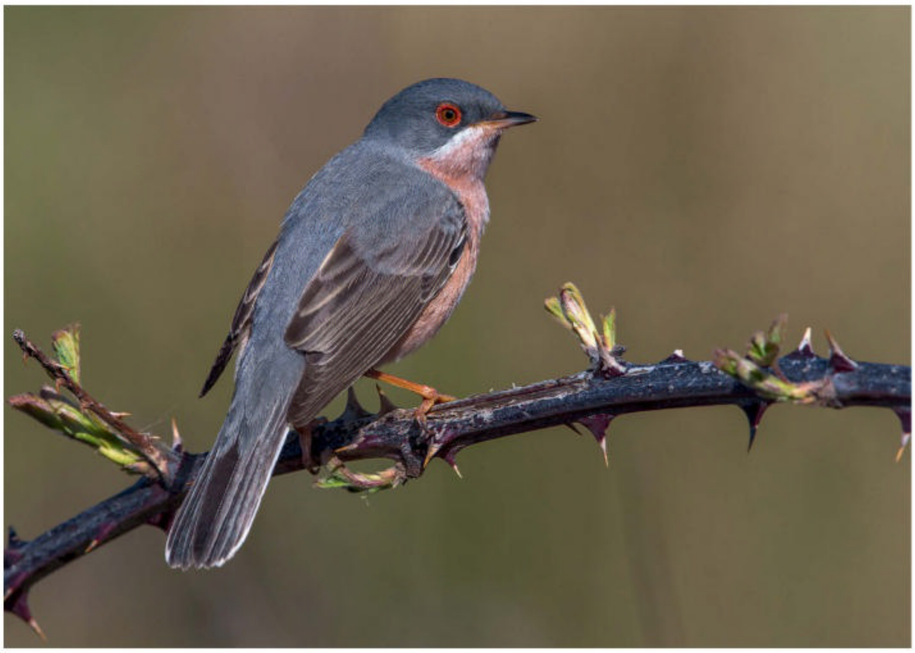
LEE GREGORY

ELEVEN: Male Western Subalpine Warbler (Fair Isle, Shetland, 9 May 2016). The lovely warm brick-orange hues in the underparts of this male immediately suggest a Western Subalpine. Note also the lack of contrast between the throat/upper breast and the rest of the underparts, the narrow, weak white submoustachial stripe and the relatively short primary projection, all of which provide extra confidence in the identification.



RICHARD BROWN

TWELVE: Male Eastern Subalpine Warbler (Skokholm, Pembrokeshire, 25 April 2015). This male shows a dramatic contrast between the dark throat/upper breast and the almost colourless flanks – a key feature of Eastern Subalpine. The almost white flanks suggest that it might belong to the eastern subspecies *albistriata*. Other strong pro-Eastern Subalpine features are the broad white submoustchial stripe, relatively long primary projection and, importantly, an obvious white white 'wedge' extending up the shaft on the second outermost tail feather.

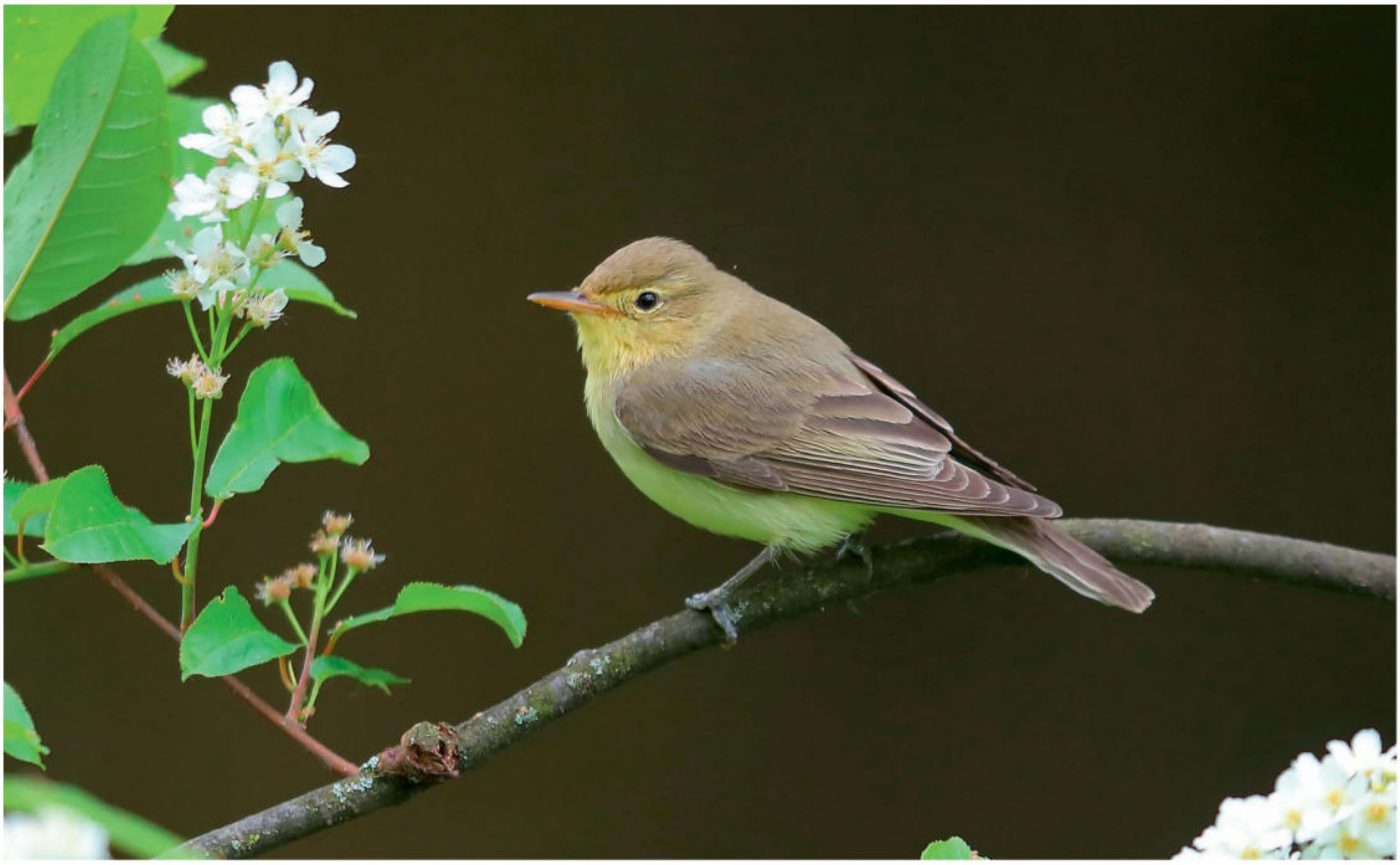


DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

THIRTEEN: Male Moltoni's Warbler (Tuscany, Italy, 16 April 2013). The beautifully soft rose-pink underparts of this bird immediately suggest Moltoni's Warbler. Although barely visible in this image, this bird would show a square white tip to the second outermost tail feather (with no white 'wedge' extending up the shaft). This feature eliminates Eastern Subalpine, but is shared with Western.

# Icterine and Melodious Warblers

Words by Dominic Mitchell



BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

ONE: Adult Icterine Warbler (Białowieza, Poland, 3 May 2019). On location alone this smart Hippolais warbler is going to be Icterine, a common summer visitor to Poland – there are just a handful of records of Melodious in Eastern Europe. Its identity can be confirmed by the primary projection, which is usually three-quarters of or equal to tertial length in Icterine, but about half to two-thirds in Melodious. Note also the pale secondary edges, forming a whitish wing panel. A very small proportion of adult Icterines, estimated at no more than 5% of the Western European population, are greyish-olive above with much reduced yellow below.

With autumn migration beginning in earnest this month, it's time to scrutinise passage warblers as they undertake the long journey south. Among the commoner species on the move are two from Continental Europe which occur regularly in small numbers, yet remain scarce enough to qualify as notable finds anywhere in Britain and Ireland. Although very similar in appearance, Icterine and Melodious Warblers are 'doable' with practice and patience. Dominic Mitchell looks at this sought-after pair of Continental drifters.

# Basic Principles

There is a select suite of species on the radar of every birder in autumn – regular enough to offer a realistic chance of discovery (weather and location permitting), yet statistically scarce and consequently always a welcome find. Near the top of this migrant hit-list are Icterine and Melodious Warblers, a species pair that breeds on the Continent and occurs in Britain and Ireland in autumn and, to a much lesser extent, spring.

Known colloquially as 'Hippos', Icterine and Melodious Warblers form the western species pair in the genus *Hippolais* (the 'tree warblers'). This genus is now half its former size, with Booted, Sykes's and Eastern and Western Olivaceous Warblers recently hived off into a separate genus, *Iduna*, along with three African species. The eastern duo of Olive-tree and Upcher's Warblers are the only others that remain in *Hippolais* alongside 'Icky' and Melodious. All members of this genus are monotypic, so any variation is individual or age related, and not associated with geographical range.

## Icterine Warbler

The more numerous and widespread of the two, Icterine Warbler breeds from Scandinavia south to Belgium and north-east France, and eastwards across much of Europe north of the Mediterranean region, as far east as western Siberia.

Most of the European breeding range is vacated between late July and September, with birds from north-west Europe moving south-east and those from Russia heading west of south, mainly across the central and eastern Mediterranean into Africa (Kennerley and Pearson 2010). A long-distance migrant, Icterine Warbler winters principally in the southern tropics of Africa from Uganda to northern South Africa.

Like other departing Scandinavian migrants, the species is prone to occur in Britain when migration coincides with an easterly or south-easterly airstream across the North Sea. It can then appear sparingly anywhere on the east coast between the Northern Isles and Kent, and to a lesser extent on the south coast. This is where confusion with Melodious Warbler is most likely to occur – for example, occurrences of Melodious significantly outnumber those of Icterine in Dorset (Green 2004), yet the reverse is the case on Scilly (Flood *et al* 2007). Icterine is classified as a rare migrant in Wales with 114 records prior to 2017 (Hughes 2017) and a scarce vagrant in Ireland (Hobbs 2020), where the total number of occurrences to 2018 is 225 (Barton and Flynn 2020).

Reflecting its northerly breeding distribution and longer migration, spring records of Icterine Warbler tend to average slightly later than those of Melodious, the first half of June often being a key time for arrivals. Breeding has occurred three times, in 1992, 2002 and 2008, and all in Scotland (Forrester *et al* 2007).

Icterine Warbler is typically greenish above and light yellow below, much like Melodious Warbler, and the distinctions – particularly the diagnostic primary projection – are discussed in depth in the captions to the accompanying photos. Pale variants occur; they are greyish-olive above with much reduced yellow on the underparts, and account for 5% or less of adults in western Europe (Kennerley and Pearson 2010).

Migrants are less vocal on passage (Shirihai and Svensson 2018), but spring males may give a strong, fast warbling song intermixed with mimicry and repeated phrases, often from more concealed perches than Melodious Warbler. Calls include a sparrow-like *terr* or *chek* and variations which may extend into chattering, as well as a Willow Warbler-like *hooeet* given mainly in late summer.

## Melodious Warbler

The south-western counterpart of Icterine Warbler, Melodious is a Western Palearctic breeding endemic with a much more restricted range. It breeds in north-west Africa in northern Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, and in Europe from Iberia and France eastwards to Italy, Slovenia and north-west Croatia, and north to the Low Countries, with small numbers also in south-west Germany and Switzerland.

Its range has expanded in recent decades, and it bred for the first time in Belgium in 1981 and The Netherlands in 1990. Where the range overlaps with that of Icterine Warbler, the two species hold mutually exclusive territories; interestingly, the presence of Melodious in the same general area as Icterine reduces the latter's reproductive success (Hagemeijer and Blair 1997).

In mid-July, Melodious Warblers start migrating to wintering grounds in tropical West Africa. Passage continues until September and is predominantly in a southerly or south-westerly direction through Iberia and the western Mediterranean; the species is a vagrant to Scandinavia, eastern and south-east Europe, as well as Turkey, but is unknown in the wider Middle East (Mitchell 2017).

Small numbers of migrating or dispersing birds also reach southern Britain. Most records are in autumn in south-west England, with a few also in Wales; numbers vary significantly from year to year. It is rarer and less than annual in Scotland, where about three-quarters of the 68 records are from the Northern Isles (McInerny and McGowan 2019). As with Icterine Warbler, it is a scarce vagrant in Ireland (Hobbs 2018) and the total number of Irish records, 217, almost matches that species' total (Barton and Flynn 2020).

Melodious Warbler also occurs as an 'overshoot' in spring, though it is much less expected at that season (notwithstanding occasional significant arrivals). The most curious and unexplained aspect of this species' occurrence patterns is that, despite range expansion on the near-Continent, records in Britain have actually declined steadily in recent decades (White and Kehoe 2017). Statistically, it is becoming rarer than Blyth's Reed Warbler, a state of affairs that no one would have predicted 25 years ago.

Melodious Warbler is very similar in plumage to Icterine Warbler, but can be reliably told at all times of year by its shorter primary projection and (typically) weaker pale secondary panel. Other differences are subtle and may overlap with Icterine, so are supportive rather than diagnostic. Again, these are discussed in more detail in the image captions. Note that pale-variant Melodious Warblers lacking green and yellow in the plumage also occur, but are estimated to form less than 5% of the population in Iberia (Kennerley and Pearson 2010).

Migrants are usually silent on passage (Shirihai and Svensson 2018), but the song, a series of often fast, scratchy verses that may contain mimicry, is occasionally heard from spring males in Britain. The call is a clicking *chet* or drawn-out variations of it, as well as a sparrow-like chattering.

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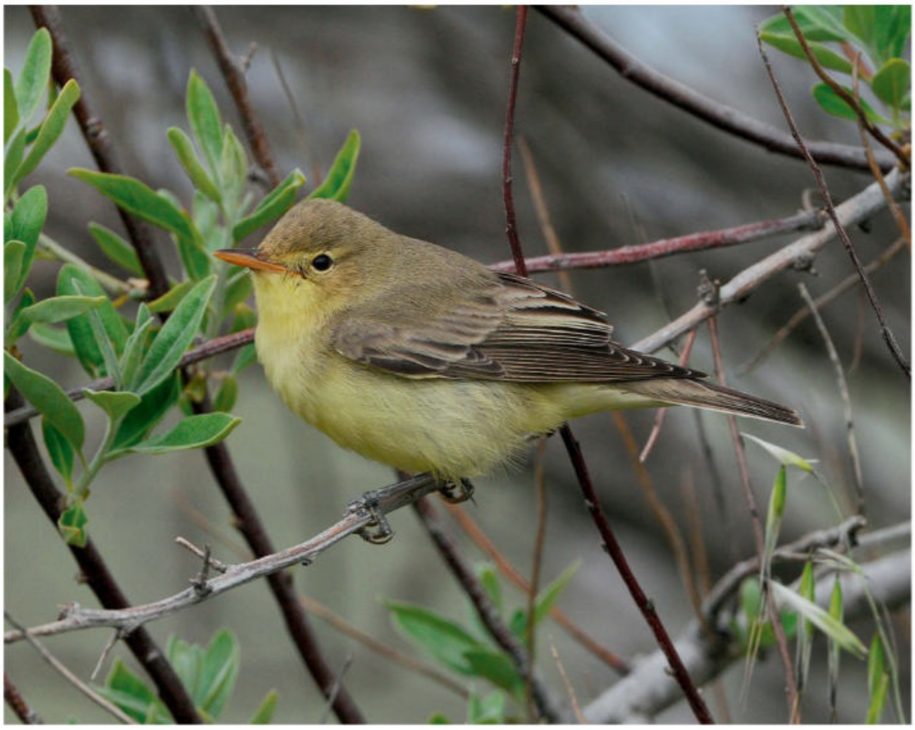
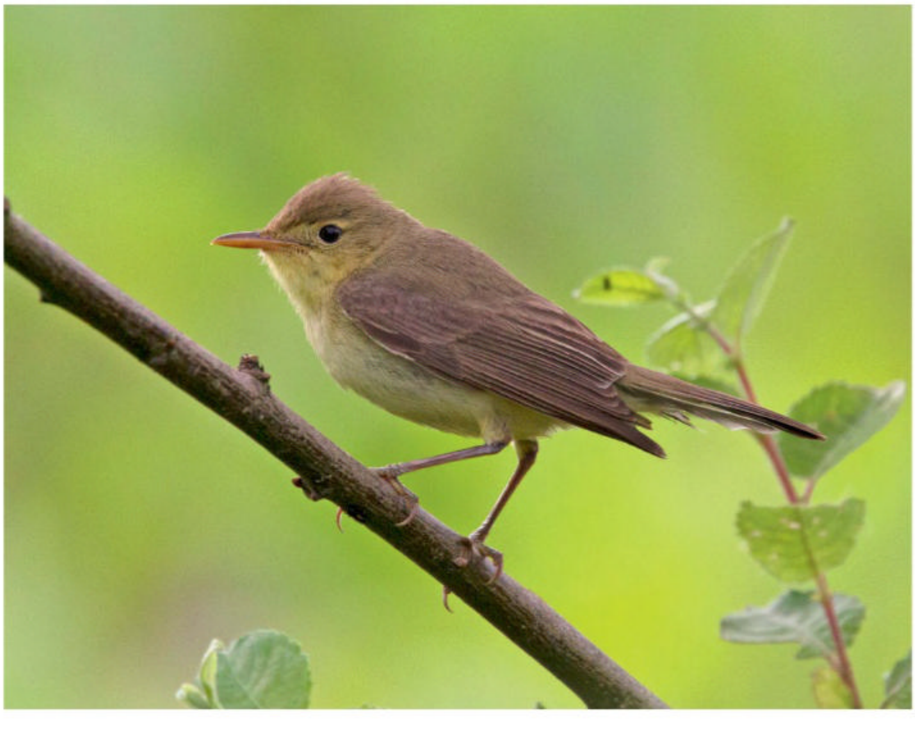


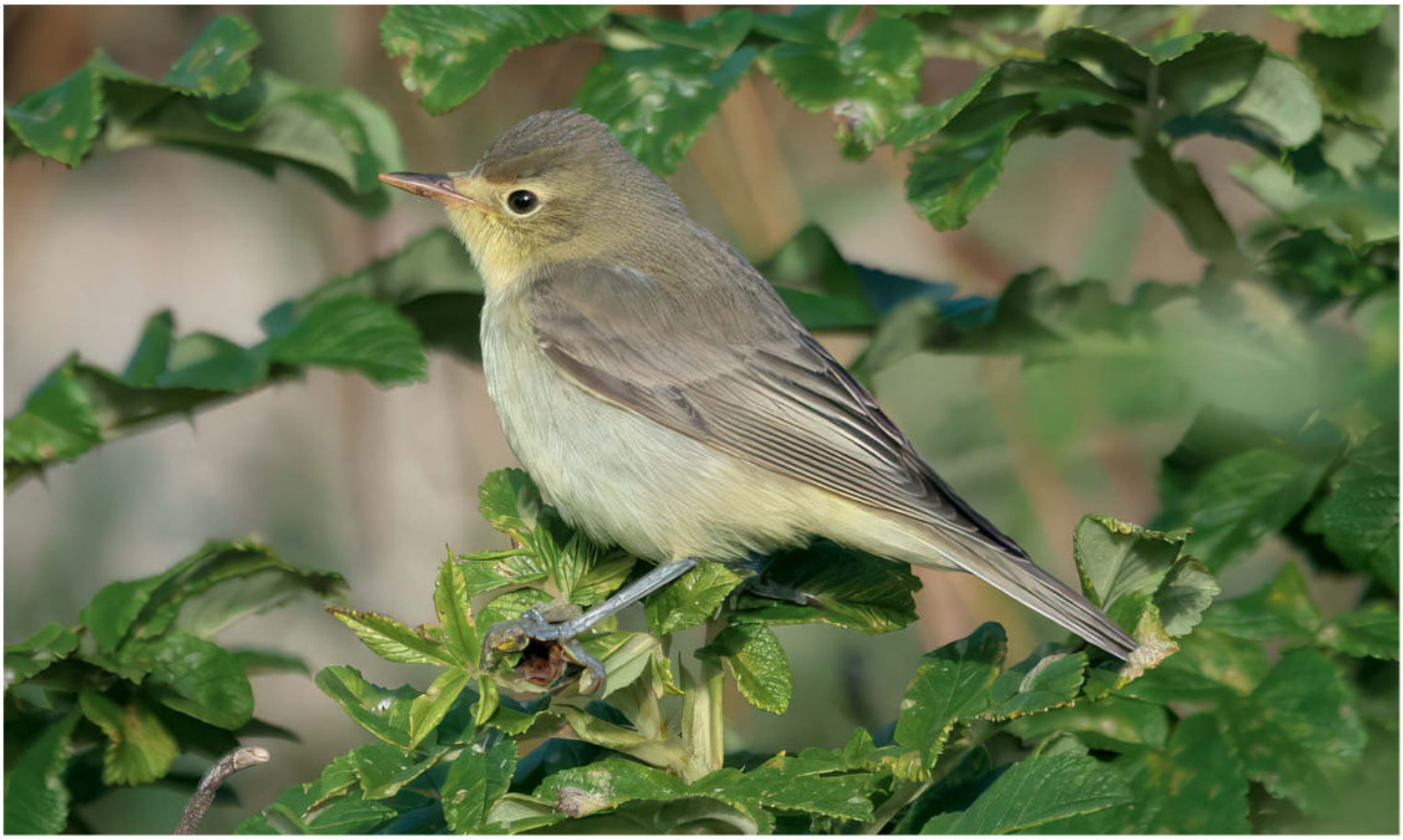
TWO: Adult Icterine Warbler (Lemnos, Greece, 28 April 2011). This spring migrant Icterine Warbler is greenish-grey above and extensively yellow below, the latter suffusion being most obvious on the chin and throat. The long wing point and pale secondary panel, more prominent here than on the worn wing of the bird in photo one, are diagnostic, but other characters, including the grey-tinged upperparts, pale-tipped dark primaries and blue-grey legs, though associated with 'classic' Icterine, are only supportive, being subject to individual variation and the possibility of overlap with Melodious.

RICHARD BROOKS (WWW.RICHARD-BROOKS.CO.UK)



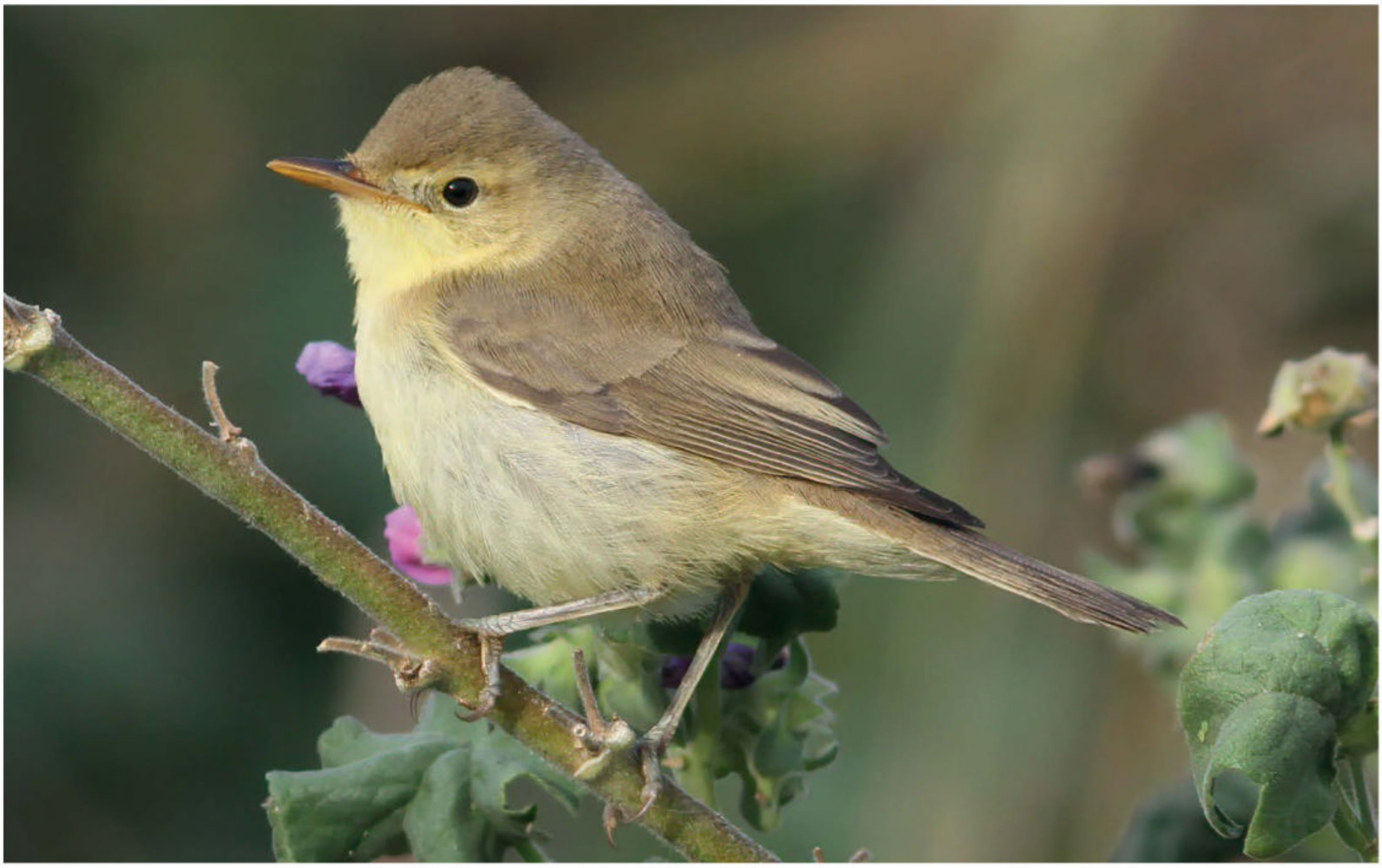
THREE: Adult Melodious Warbler (Ooijpolder, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, 12 June 2016). With no dark markings on the lores and a weak supercilium barely extending behind the eye, as well as a strong bill, the 'open-faced' look of this warbler immediately says 'Hippo'. Both European species now occur in the Low Countries in summer, but this bird's relatively short primary projection and lack of a significant whitish wing panel readily identify it as Melodious. Compared to Icterine, note also the brownish cast to the upperparts, the worn primaries lacking distinct pale tips, and brownish tone to the legs. Pale variants lacking green and yellow in the plumage are known to occur.

HARVEY VAN DIEK (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



STEVE MINTON

FOUR:  Juvenile Icterine Warbler (Scatness, Mainland, Shetland, 22 August 2009). This Icterine, with a typical date and location for an autumn arrival in Britain, can safely be aged as a juvenile by its uniformly fresh plumage – adults moult in Africa prior to spring migration and should show obvious wear by autumn. Typically, juveniles are slightly browner and less strongly tinged with green above, less saturated with yellow on the underparts and have a less contrasting pale wing panel (though it is often still more noticeable than on worn adults). The overall effect is a more subdued appearance compared with spring birds.

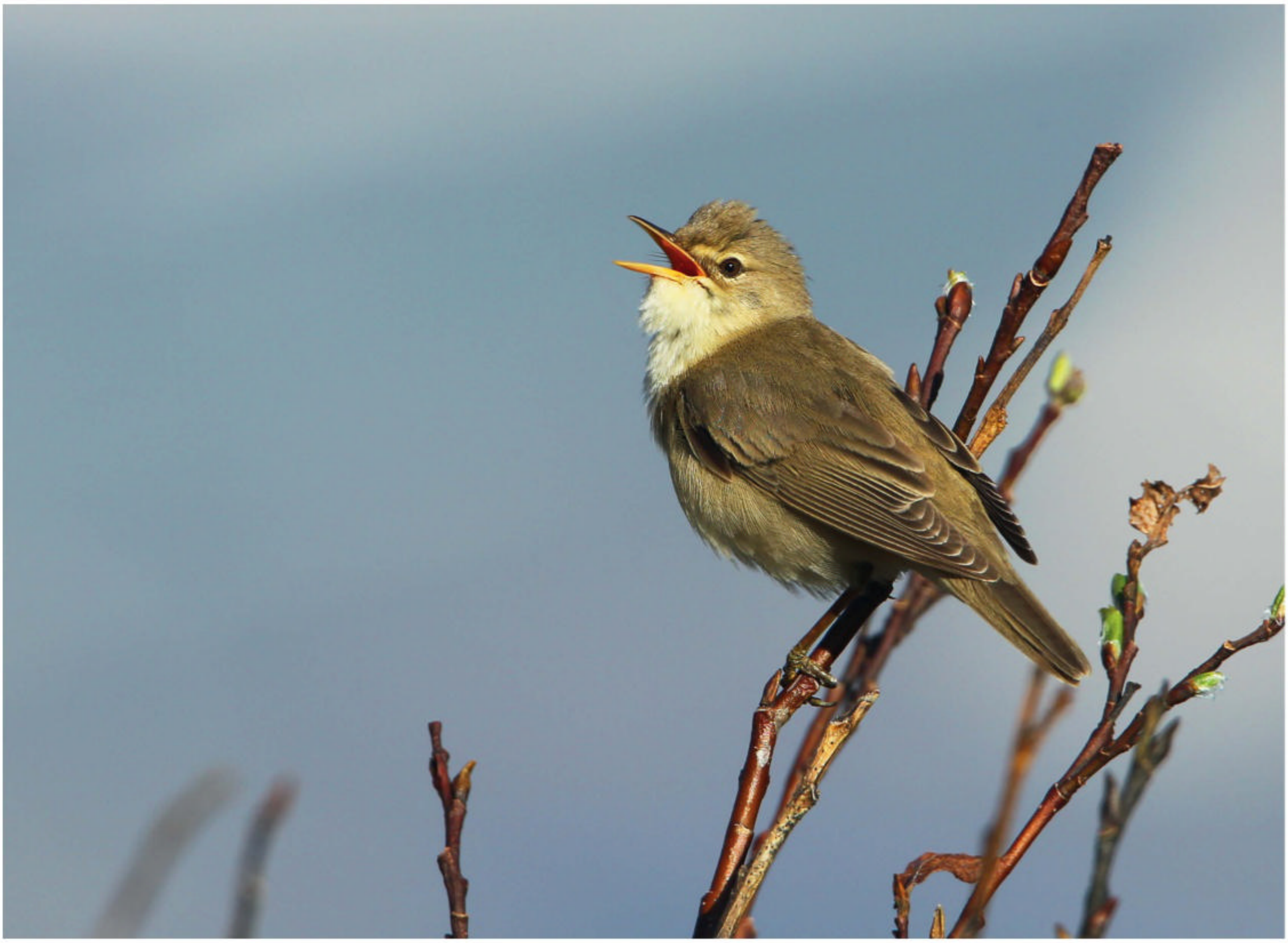


PETER MOORE

FIVE: Juvenile Melodious Warbler (Portland, Dorset, 24 September 2013). Juvenile Melodious is also in fresh plumage in autumn, with brown-toned upperparts and reduced yellow below, often strongest on the face and throat. Most juveniles have rather plain-looking wings but this individual has a distinct pale panel, recalling Icterine; in this instance the key to identification as Melodious is its short primary projection. A further pitfall for the unwary in autumn is young Willow Warbler, which is also washed yellow on the underparts, but both Hippolais warblers are slightly larger with stronger bills, and lack the dark eyestripe and longer yellowish supercilium of that species.

# Reed, Marsh and Blyth's Reed Warblers

Words by Andy Stoddart



AURELIEN AUDEVARD

ONE: Marsh Warbler (Hautes-Alpes, France, 28 May 2012). This beautiful portrait shows a singing Marsh Warbler to perfection. It is typically a rather dull olive above with no real warm, rufous hues and the rump is just a pale olive, again with no bright or ginger colour. Most eyecatching here, however, are structural clues. The closed wing is very long, as long as or perhaps even longer than the exposed tertials, with regularly spaced primaries and a neat pale tip to each primary. A supporting character is the apparently quite large bill. Of course, in life this bird would give away its identity purely by its remarkable song.

It may be common enough in spring and summer, but the featureless appearance of Reed Warbler, combined with the lack of opportunity to gain familiarity with lookalike Marsh and Blyth's Reed Warblers, means that any out-of-place unstreaked 'reed' warbler is often a source of confusion. Andy Stoddart gets to grips with a recurringly troublesome issue.

# Basic Principles

Of all the warblers, three unstreaked *Acrocephalus* species – Reed, Marsh and Blyth's Reed – are the most notorious, seemingly specially designed to confound the birder. They are relatively uniform and featureless in appearance, their plumage hues are ever changing with the light and they are notoriously skulking and difficult to observe. Furthermore, only Reed Warbler is common, so the chances to gain British experience of the other two species are few and far between. No wonder, then, that an encounter with one of these birds can make the heart sink.

## Reed Warbler

This is a common breeding bird of reedbeds throughout England and Wales – and indeed throughout most of Europe apart from the north – where singing birds are easy to find. The species is also a regular migrant at coastal sites, not always in reedbeds, and it is these birds which are likely to pose the most sigificant problems. Autumn migrants can be seen as late as November, so it doesn't follow that a late bird is more likely to be one of its rarer cousins.

## Marsh Warbler

A common breeding bird in eastern Europe and western Russia, Marsh Warbler is a very rare breeding species in Britain. For most of us, it will only be encountered as a migrant. Such birds can be found during both seasons, but are always very scarce or rare.

In spring this is typically one of the latest migrants of all, usually in the closing days of May and early June. These are drifted continental birds (often occurring alongside other species such as Red-backed Shrike and Icterine Warbler) and almost all sightings are in eastern Britain, the Northern Isles being particularly favoured. Many such spring birds will sing, instantly resolving their identification. In autumn, Marsh Warbler is rarer, the few records falling mainly in September.

## Blyth's Reed Warbler

This species, breeding in eastern Europe and western and central Russia, was formerly a near-mythical autumn rarity with only a tiny handful of historical records.

Recently its field characters have become better known, and this species is now increasingly identified in the field, leading to a dramatic upsurge in the number of records – more than 130 have now been accepted in Britain. While some of this is due to observer knowledge and awareness, Blyth's Reed Warbler is also spreading west in northern Europe. It now breeds commonly as close as southern Finland.

The species can be encountered at both migration seasons, its increasing presence in Scandinavia leading to spring birds overshooting ever more frequently to Britain's east coast. As with Marsh Warbler, these occur in late spring and, with luck, they may take up a temporary territory and sing. Most Blyth's Reed Warblers, however, occur in autumn, mostly in September and, as expected, mostly on the east coast, especially on the Northern Isles.

## Identification

The best shortcut to identifying an unstreaked *Acrocephalus* is to listen to its song. Sadly, this is only possible in spring, and even then not with all birds.

Reed Warbler has the familiar slow, rhythmic and steady-paced rather grumpy-sounding collection of grunts and warbles. Marsh Warbler, by contrast, is a rightly famous virtuoso performer, throwing together a seemingly inexhaustible repertoire of imitated bird songs and calls, both from its European breeding grounds and its winter quarters in east Africa. Blyth's Reed Warbler also has a rich fluty song incorporating much mimicry, but it is slower and steadier paced than Marsh Warbler and repeats phrases in the manner of a Song Thrush.

With non-singing birds, Reed Warbler is always the default option and the benchmark against which any bird should be compared. The first task is to try to get good views. This, however, is easier said than done. In some low, dense habitats there is little prospect that the birds will come out and show themselves, but in other more open habitats there is more hope. Here, sitting back with a telescope may be successful.

On occasion, individuals can be remarkably arboreal, even 'leaf gleaning' in the canopy. Such birds are the most likely to yield a satisfactory identification.

It is important, of course, to be sure that what you're watching really is an *Acrocephalus* and not, for example, a *Hippolais* or *Iduna* warbler. Although good views should enable many birds to be identified, there will always be some which defy certain identification.

Look for a few key areas. Is the bird a bright, warm colour? Is it particularly bright or gingery on the rump? Are its flanks washed warm buff? Is its eyering strong? Is its wing projection moderately long? Are the centres to its tertials contrastingly dark? If so, your bird is most likely a Reed Warbler.

However, if your bird is a softer olive colour above with no contrasting bright or gingery rump, and a yellowy-cream colour below, if it has a strong-looking bill and a very long primary projection (with, in spring, neat pale tips) and if its legs are a pale straw colour, then you might be onto a Marsh Warbler.

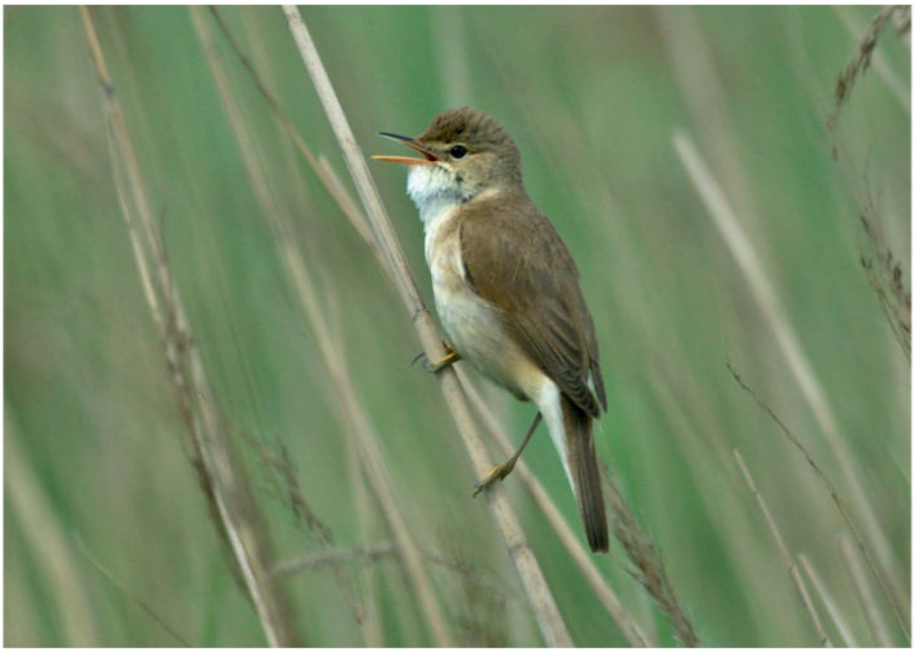
Finally, if your candidate is a dull, cold grey-brown above with little or no contrasting bright rump, and greyish-white below, if it has a weak eyering and a more pronounced fore-supercilium, which may extend a little way behind the eye, a long, fine-looking bill, a relatively short primary projection and a rather plain-looking wing with reduced contrasts in the tertials, then you may have a Blyth's Reed Warbler on your hands.

There is no substitute for detailed observation and note taking. This is necessary for a number of reasons. Firstly, plumage hues vary with age and season, spring birds generally being colder toned than fresh autumn individuals. Secondly, plumage hues can change dramatically with the light and background vegetation and will not be well captured in photographs. Thirdly, the fine detail of face pattern or wing structure will be difficult to observe and quantify precisely unless the bird is watched for some time.

## Calls

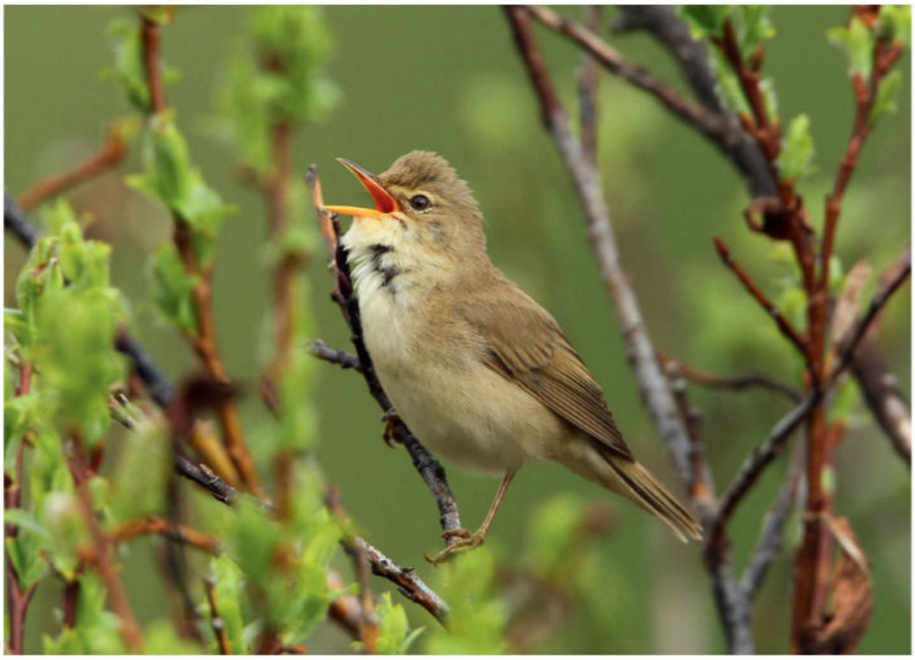
It is also important not to neglect calls. All three can make a variety of noises, but the typical call of Reed Warbler is a harsh *chirr*, while Marsh Warbler generally gives a harsh *teck* and Blyth's Reed Warbler gives a distinctive hard *tack* resembling Blackcap or Lesser Whitethroat.

TWO: Reed Warbler (Seaforth, Lancashire, 5 June 2007). Apart from the fact that it is singing in reeds, this Reed Warbler is instantly identifiable by its warm, rufous plumage hues – the whole of the upperparts are softly suffused with ginger. Confirmation of its identity can be gained by examining its wing structure. The primary projection is quite short, here somewhat shorter than the exposed tertials, and typically, there are no pale primary tips. Other clues are provided by the bird's rather thin-billed appearance, its dull legs and its strongly buff-washed flanks.



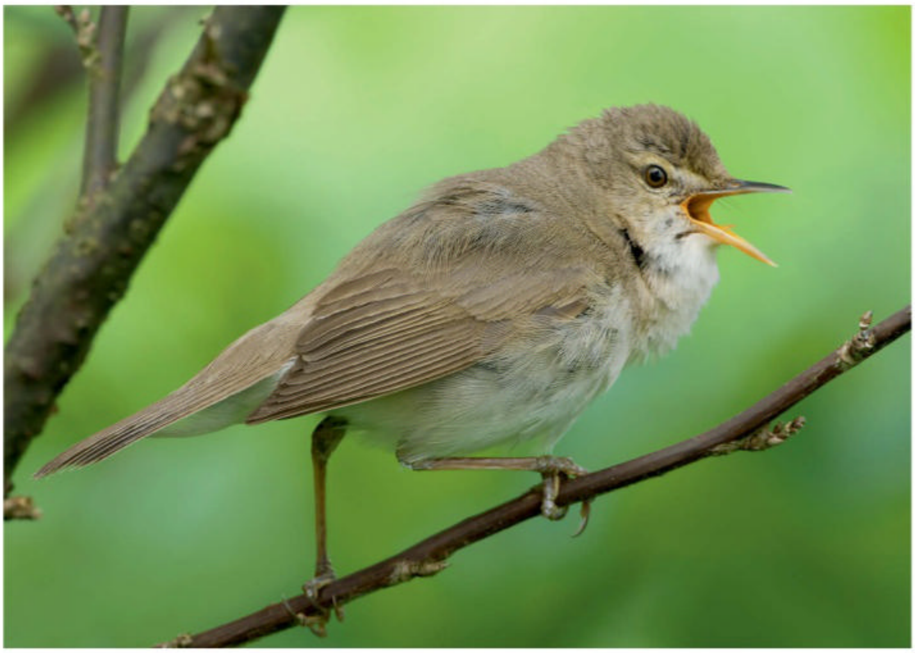
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

THREE: Marsh Warbler (Hautes-Alpes, France, 28 May 2012). This bird really grabs the attention with its stout bill, an initial clue that this may be a Marsh Warbler. Confirmation of the identification is straightforward here – the upperparts are a lovely soft olive colour with no hint of rufous, the flanks are also washed olive, rather than bright buff, and the wing structure looks spot-on too. Although the pale primary tips cannot be seen from this angle, the primary projection is clearly very long. An additional clue is provided by the subtle yellow or straw hues in the legs.



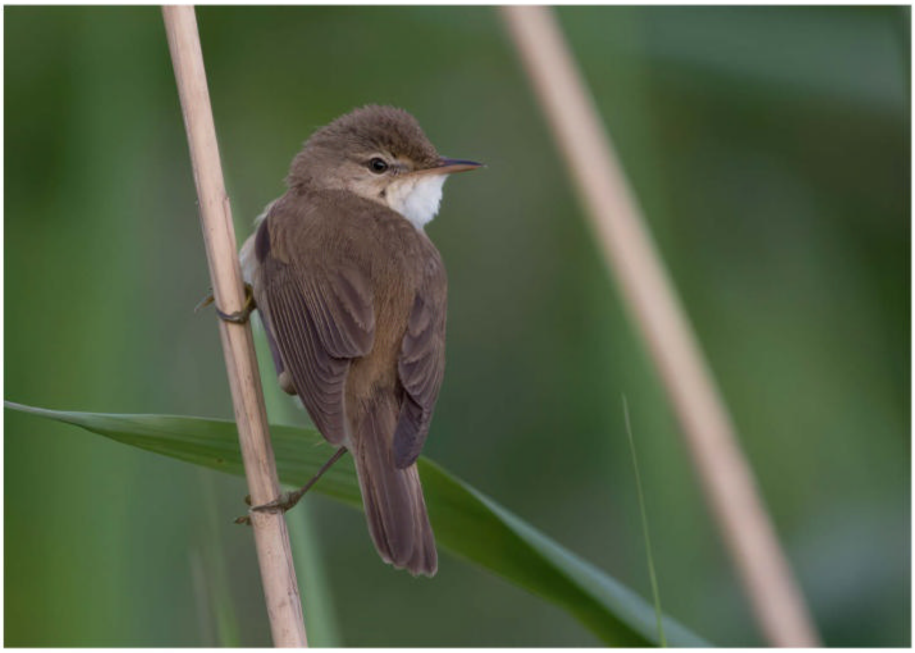
AURELIEN AUDEVARD

FOUR: Blyth's Reed Warbler (North Karelia, Finland, 31 May 2008). While Reed and Marsh Warblers (particularly the latter) can look quite robust, Blyth's Reed Warbler (as here) often looks quite fragile. In terms of plumage, this is a cold grey-brown bird, lacking rufous hues and more closely resembling a dull Marsh Warbler. There are other clues too: the face pattern shows quite a weak eyering yet quite a strong supercilium, especially before the eye, and the closed wing lacks the dark tertial centres shown by both Reed and Marsh Warblers. Most importantly, the closed wing can be seen to be very short, significantly shorter than the exposed tertials.



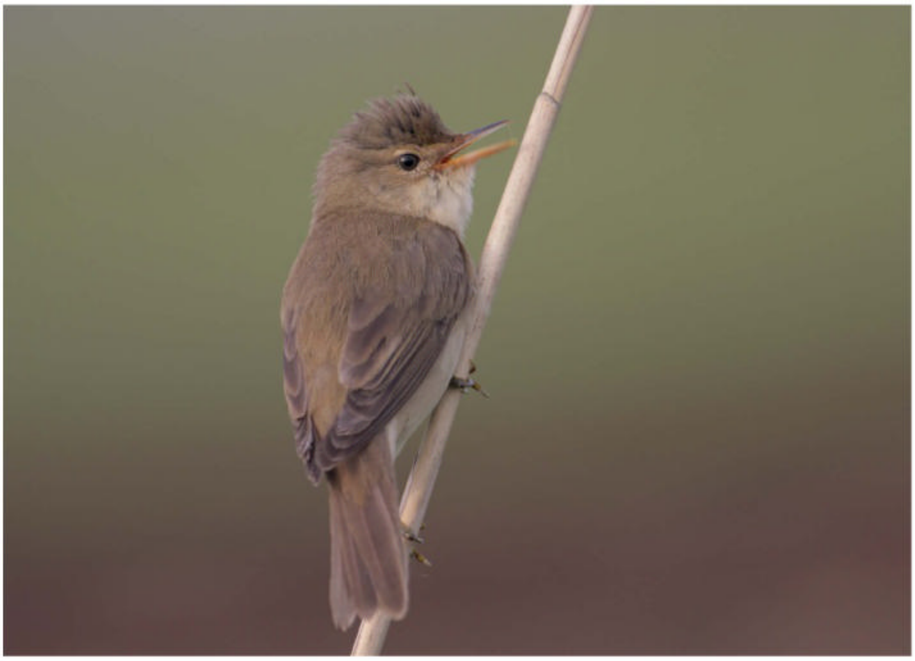
DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)



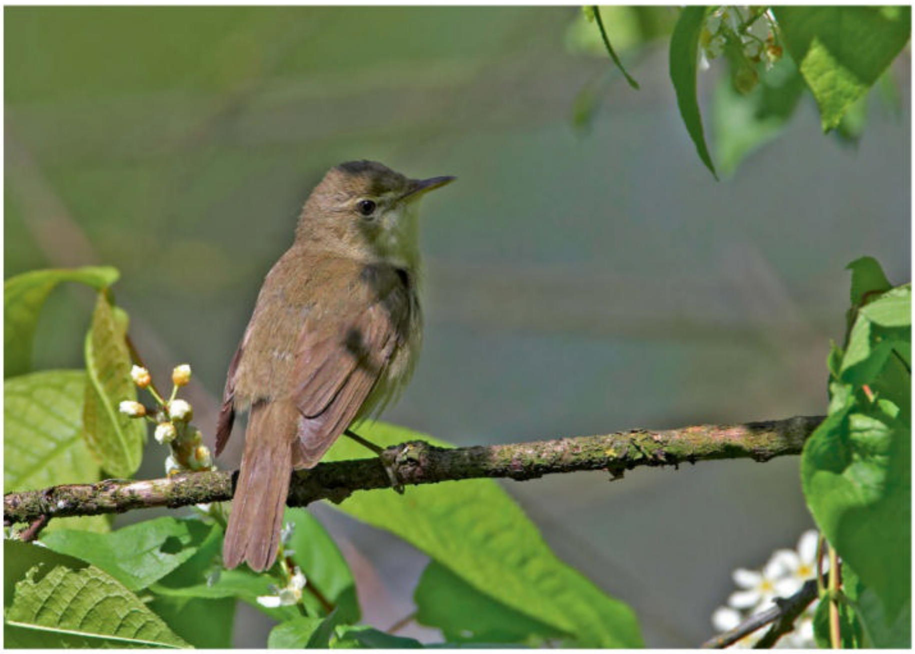
FIVE: Reed Warbler (Whitlingham CP, Norfolk, 22 May 2007). This engaging portrait shows a bird with a prominent eyering and a weak fore-supercilium. There are strongly warm, rufous hues in the upperparts, especially on the rump, and well-defined dark centres to the tertials. The primary projection is fractionally shorter than the exposed tertials and there are no pale primary tips. The bill also seems unremarkable in structure and the legs are distinctly dark. With this combination of features, this can only be a Reed Warbler.

REINT JAKOB SCHUT (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

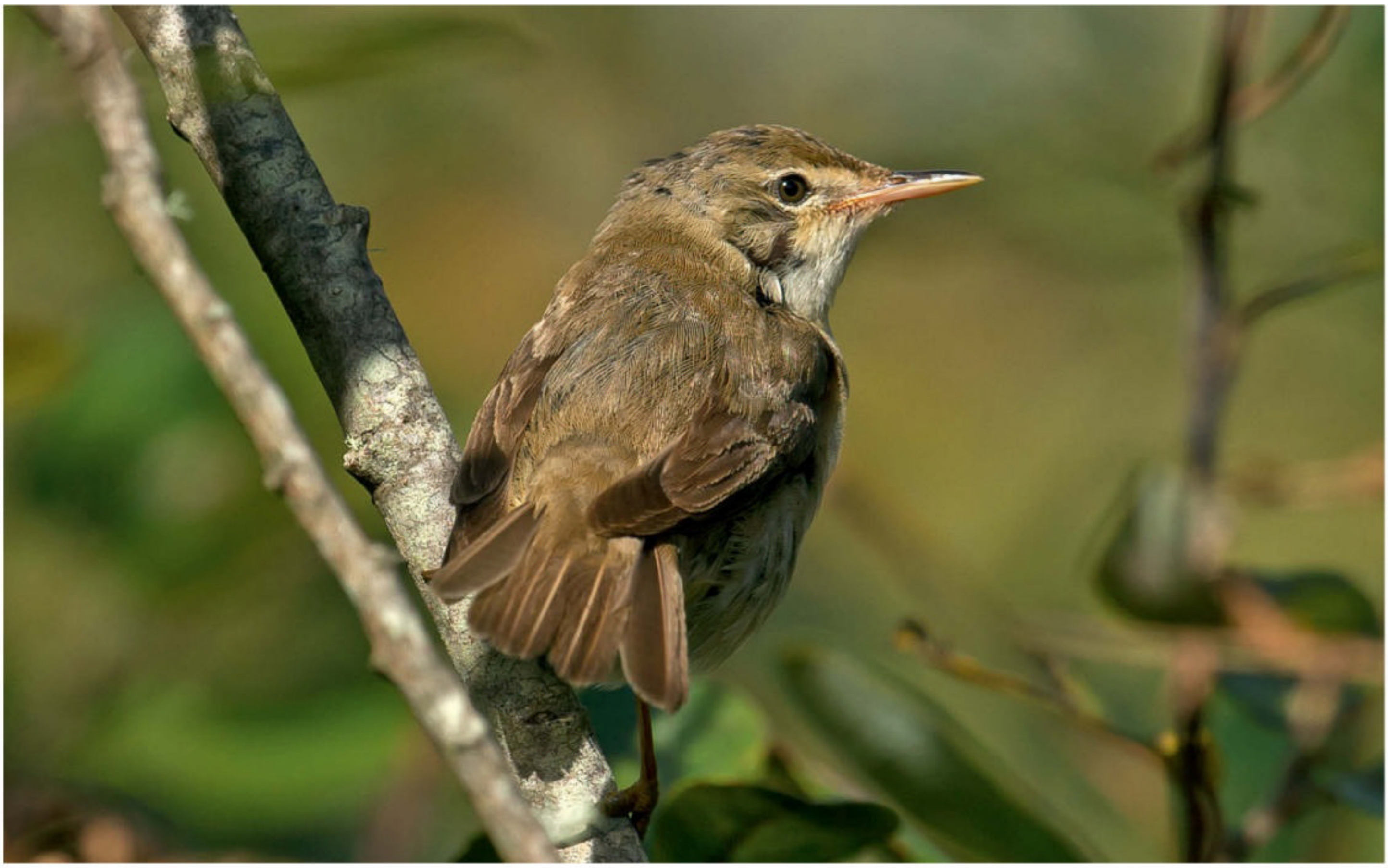


SIX: Marsh Warbler (Groningen, The Netherlands, 28 May 2008). By contrast, this bird is noticeably pale olivey above, quite unlike a Reed Warbler. Its rump is contrastingly paler but, crucially, it is not rufous. The bill also looks a little on the stout side, but it is to the wing that we must turn to fully establish the identification. Here we can see that the primary projection is very long, clearly longer than the exposed tertials, although it is a somewhat worn individual and the pale primary tips have disappeared. Nevertheless, there is enough here to identify this bird as a Marsh Warbler.

TOMI MUUKKONEN (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

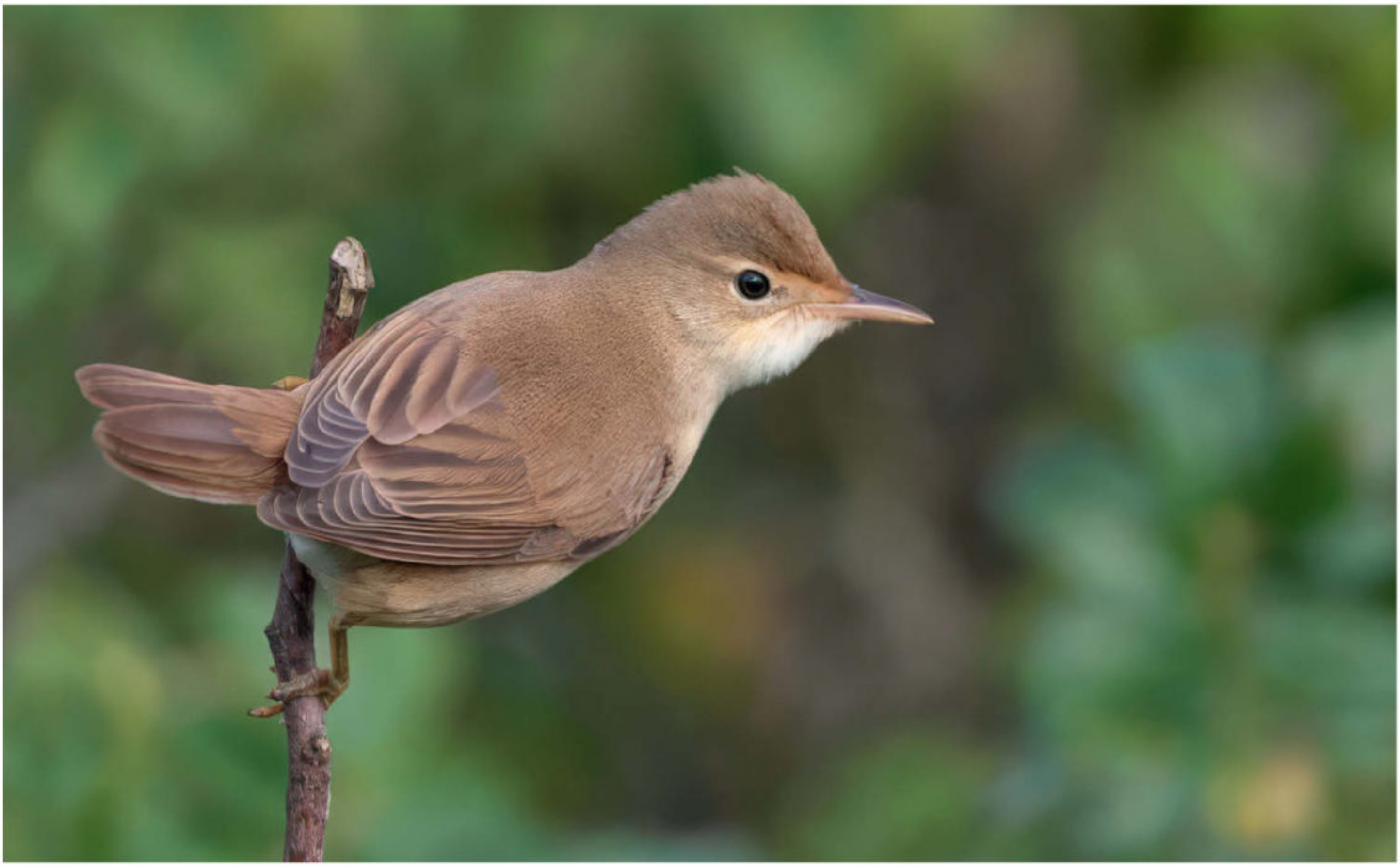


SEVEN: Blyth's Reed Warbler (Helsinki, Finland, 31 May 2006). This bird looks typically small and fragile, and in fact in its typical breeding habitat of bushes and low trees, it momentarily resembles a *Phylloscopus* warbler. Its plumage is a cold olive-grey, slightly more olive than the bird in photo four, and clearly lacking any rufous, either in the mantle or the rump. The eyering is so weak as to be almost non-existent and the fore-supercilium is the most striking component of the face pattern. Here it also extends a little way behind the eye too, again typical of this species. Note also the plain tertials and therefore plain closed wing and also the very short primary projection, here reminiscent of Common Chiffchaff.



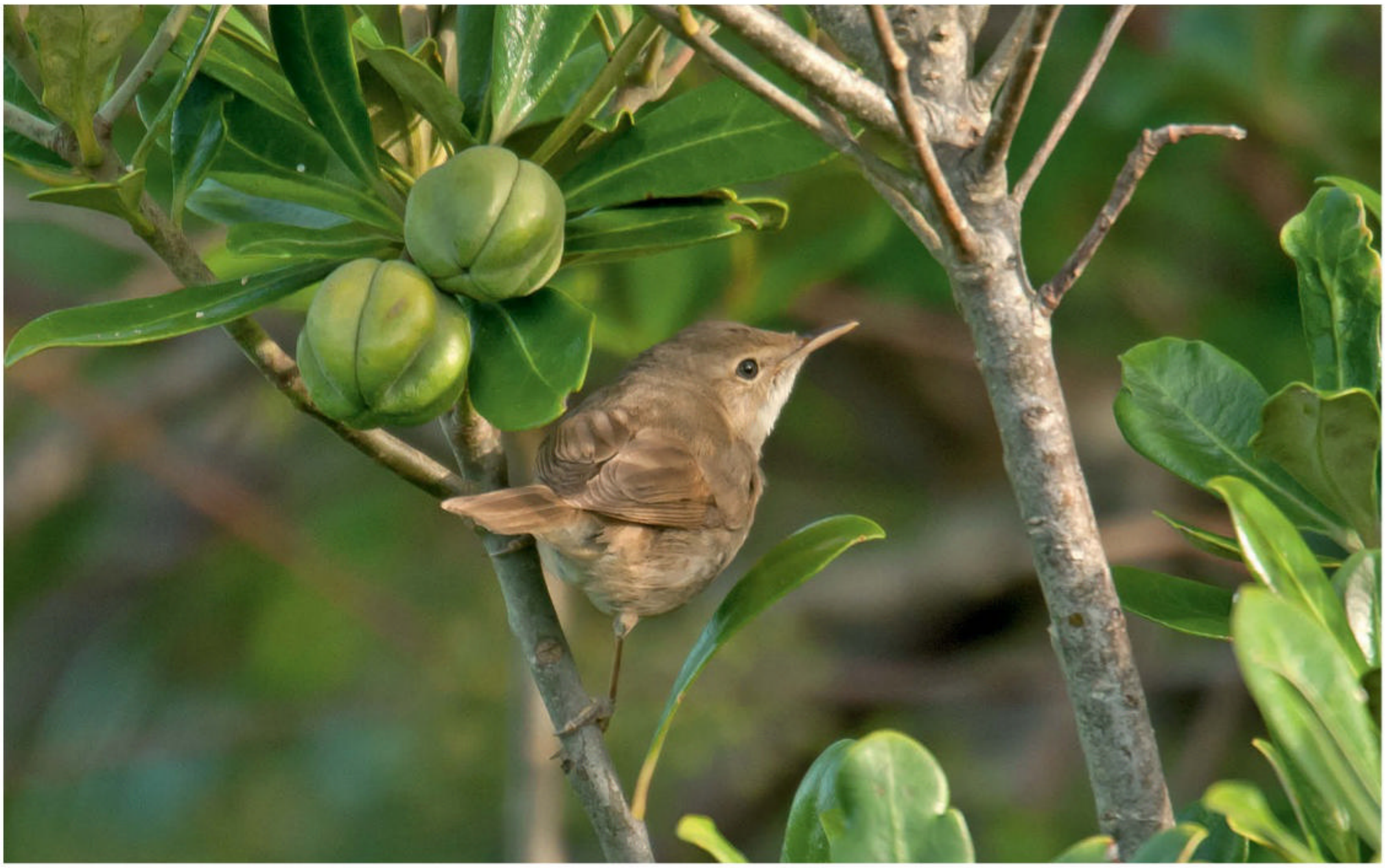
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

EIGHT: Reed Warbler (St Mary's, Scilly, 18 October 2010). This somewhat tatty autumn adult nevertheless shows a good set of Reed Warbler features. It is a bright, warm colour above, the face pattern includes a good eyering, the rump is both contrastingly pale and warm toned and there are good contrasts still visible in the closed wing. Furthermore, the primary projection looks unexceptional, being neither especially long nor especially short.



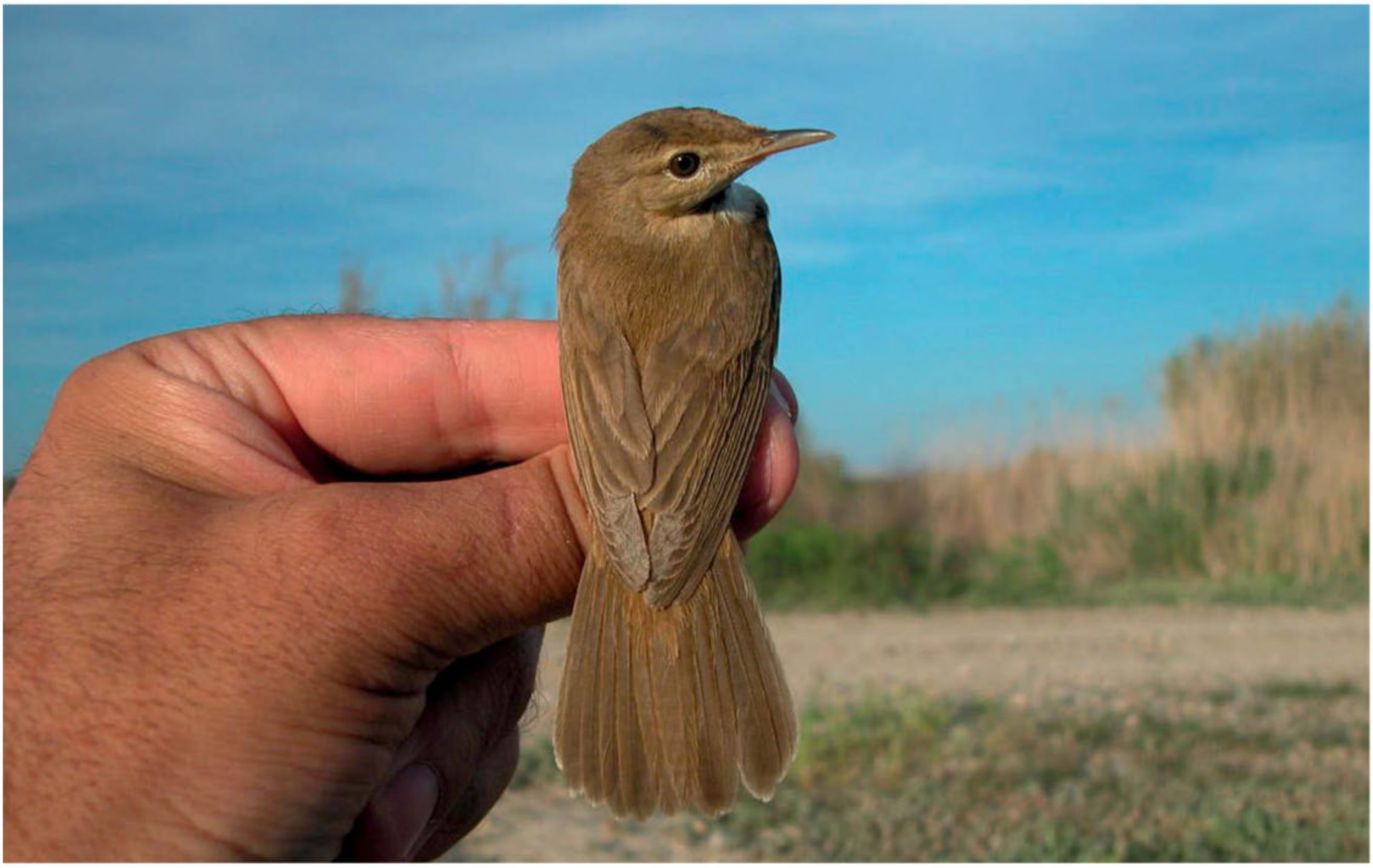
ROBBIE BROOKS

NINE: Marsh Warbler (Unst, Shetland, 5 September 2009). This autumn Marsh Warbler typically looks an 'interesting' colour, like a rather pale, slightly olivey Garden Warbler. This in itself should be enough to attract attention, but there are plenty more clues visible here. The bill looks stout and the primary projection, though foreshortened, is very long, and there is a beautiful neat pale tip to each primary. The rump cannot be seen, but the visible uppertail coverts are not strongly rufous, while the flanks are only softly washed and, perhaps most significantly, the legs are a lovely straw colour.



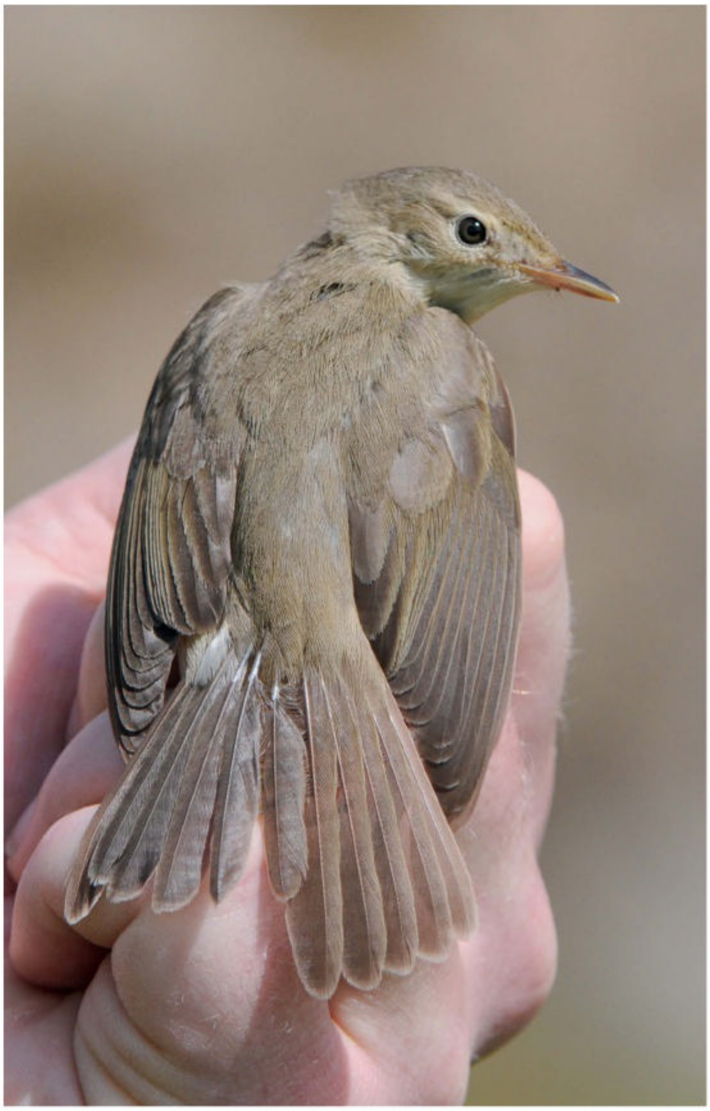
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

TEN: Blyth's Reed Warbler (St Agnes, Scilly, 16 October 2008). Yet again, this Blyth's Reed Warbler looks small and frail. It also looks quite 'spiky billed', while the primary projection, though foreshortened, is very short and not as long as the exposed tertials. Other features are apparent too: the eyering is weak, the contrasts in the closed wing are soft and diffuse, giving a 'plain-winged' look, the upperparts are a rather 'mousey' brown, lacking strong warm hues, and the legs are dull. This set of features adds up to a pretty typical autumn Blyth's Reed Warbler.



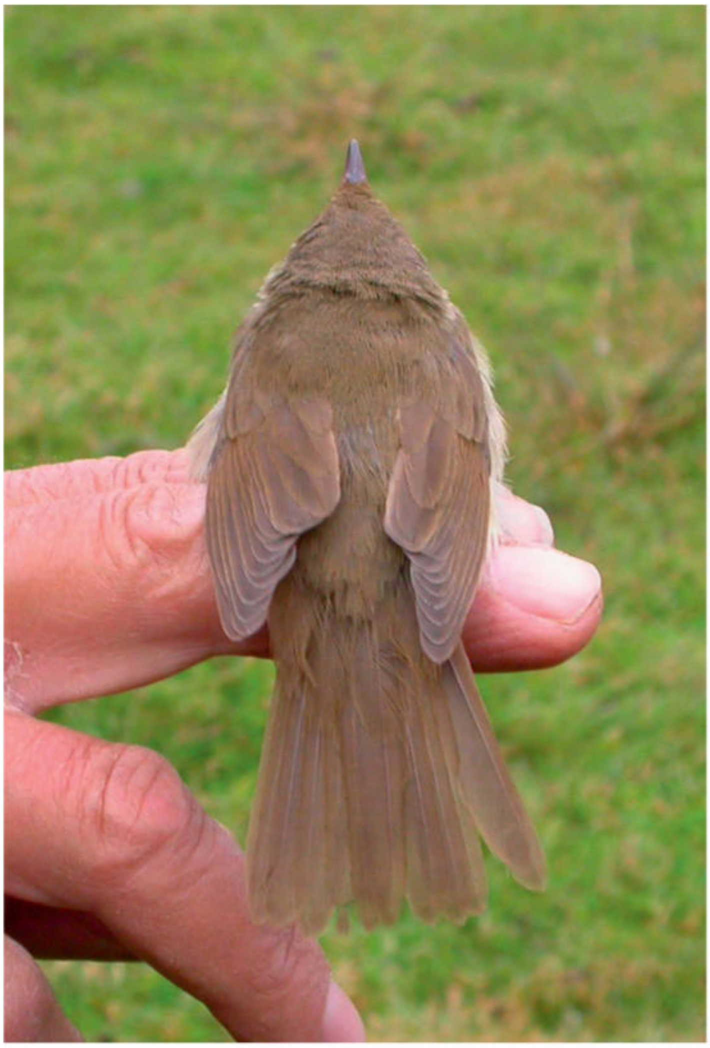
JAVIER BLASCO ZUMETA (WWW.JAVIERBLASCO.ARRAKIS.ES/INDEXE.HTM)

ELEVEN: Reed Warbler (Pina de Ebro, Spain, 26 April 2008). This close-up of a spring Reed Warbler shows off its bright, gingery plumage hues to perfection. Although the rump is hidden by the closed wings, it is just possible to see that the uppertail coverts are a very bright orangey colour. Also visible here is the typical moderately prominent eyering and weak fore-supercilium, as well as the medium-length primary projection.



REBECCA NASON (WWW.REBECCANASON.COM)

TWELVE: Marsh Warbler (Fair Isle, Shetland, 11 June 2009). This in-hand Marsh Warbler offers a perfect contrast to photo eleven. Here the pale olivey-grey plumage hues are striking – this bird looks very distinct from Reed Warbler. Also obvious is the lack of a contrasting rump, a total absence of warm, rufous hues anywhere, a stout-looking bill and, perhaps most obvious of all, a stunningly long primary projection, although the pale primary tips are here worn off.



TONY AND HELEN MAINWOOD

THIRTEEN: Blyth's Reed Warbler (Foula, Shetland, 2 October 2004). Even in this somewhat unconventional portrait, this Blyth's Reed Warbler still manages to look small as well as 'spiky billed'. Slightly warm plumage hues are typical of young Blyth's Reed Warbler in autumn, but note the absence of a contrasting ginger rump. Note also the soft warm suffusion across the base of the flight feathers, again typical of autumn Blyth's Reed Warbler. Most striking here, however, is the combination of a noticeably short primary projection and weak contrasts in the wing, giving a very plain overall appearance.

## Find your own Reed, Marsh and Blyth's Reed Warblers

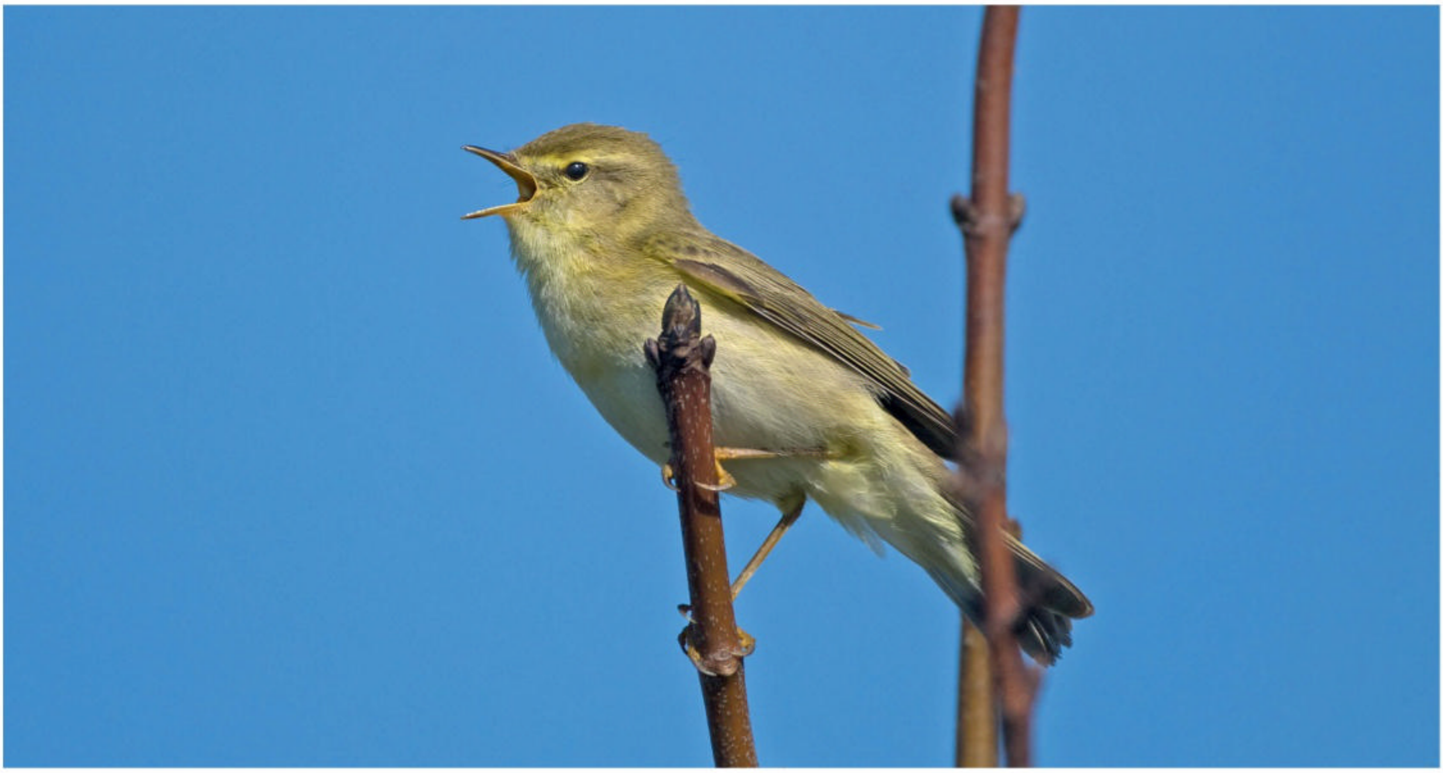
While Reed Warblers can be found in some of the smallest reedbeds in England and Wales (and locally in Marsh Warbler-like drier vegetation next to wet areas), the species is mostly absent from Scotland except as a migrant. There, particularly on the Northern Isles and east coast, it is likely to cause the most confusion with the occasional Marsh and even rarer Blyth's Reed.

Marsh Warbler is an erratic breeder in patches of rank nettle, willowherb and Cow Parsley in south-east England and the Midlands. Regular breeding sites have emptied in recent years and it is best to keep your ear to the local grapevine to discover the whereabouts of any singing males. Nest sites of this Schedule 1 species are unlikely to be divulged publicly, but singing birds are often announced via the news services, particularly as they sing so loudly and obviously that their presence is often no secret.

Blyth's Reed Warbler is an annual autumn rarity, but the odd bird has been discovered singing in spring. When this happens, the species can be observed behaving more 'normally' in its more usual habitat of riverine scrub. Otherwise, it will likely be at a migration hot-spot, where the species can be somewhat unhelpful and skulking.

# Common and Iberian Chiffchaffs and Willow Warbler

Words by Andy Stoddart



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

ONE: Willow Warbler (Hightown, Lancashire, 26 April 2007). There is perhaps no more enchanting song than that of Willow Warbler. Freshly arrived, this bird is in full voice, filling the air with its silvery cadences. In life its identification would be straightforward, but there are plenty of visual clues here to this bird's identity as well. The beautiful bright green and yellow hues are typical of Willow Warbler, as are its strong face pattern comprising a bold supercilium but relatively unmarked ear coverts and weak eyering. The wing structure cannot be seen properly thanks to the branch in the foreground, but the pale orangey legs are readily visible.

Separating Common Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler is a perennial challenge, particularly in spring when many migrants arrive and begin to establish breeding territories. Add to this the modern awareness that the recently split Iberian Chiffchaff can be present as a cryptic overshoot, occupying a no-man's land appearance-wise which makes it easily confusable with the other two species, and you have the perfect storm of an ID headache. Fear not – Andy Stoddart is here to help you differentiate between all three with confidence.

# Basic Principles

The species pair of Willow Warbler and Common Chiffchaff is one of the classic identification problems. While many individuals are straightforward to separate with practice, the occasional bird can still perplex even the most experienced birder. And nowadays there is another challenge: Iberian Chiffchaff. Only recently recognised as a full species, it is being found annually in Britain. It combines the appearance of both Willow Warbler and Common Chiffchaff; indeed so similar is it to its siblings that at present acceptance relies on its distinctive song or call.

## Common Chiffchaff

This is a very common species across a very large breeding range which extends from Ireland in the west to Siberia in the east. There are a number of subspecies, but those of most relevance are the nominate of westernmost Europe and abietinus of Scandinavia and western Russia. Distinctions between the two are small. Some eastern abietinus appear a little paler and greyer, but many are indistinguishable from collybita.

Common Chiffchaff is not such a great migrant as Willow Warbler, with many wintering north of the Sahara, particularly around the Mediterranean, but small numbers also in southern Britain. It is a widespread (and increasing) breeder in Britain, most arriving early, in March, and departing mid-autumn. Continental migrants occur regularly, too. Any 'Willow/Chiff' encountered in winter will almost certainly be this species.

In keeping with its much shorter migration, Common Chiffchaff has a shorter, more rounded wing with a shorter primary projection than that of Willow Warbler – generally half to two-thirds the length of the tertials.

Many are drabber than Willow Warbler, slightly less bright green above and more sullied on the underparts, particularly on the flanks. The face pattern is plainer, with a less marked loral line and eyestripe, a weaker supercilium, more sullied ear coverts and a prominent eyering which dominates the face and gives a more 'spectacled' expression. The legs are typically dark but can appear paler on some birds.

A characteristic feature of Common Chiffchaff is its habit of 'tail dipping'. Although occasionally seen in Willow Warbler, it is persistent and eyecatching in Common Chiffchaff.

The song is the familiar metronomic *chiff chaff*, but the species possesses a variety of calls. These include a strongly upwardly inflected *hooeet* and a downwards-inflected *sweeoo*, heard mainly (but not exclusively) from young birds in autumn.

## Iberian Chiffchaff

This species breeds almost exclusively in the Iberian peninsula. It occurs in Britain primarily as an 'overshooting' vagrant, with many records involving long-staying birds singing and defending territories. It is almost always the song that first attracts attention to this species.

Unlike many vagrants, which are typically found mainly at coastal migration sites, Iberian Chiffchaffs are often seen at inland sites. To date almost 50 have been discovered in Britain, mostly singing males in April and May, and with a preponderance of records in the south. Remarkably, a pair bred in Glamorgan in 2015 and raised seven young.

In structure, Iberian Chiffchaff resembles Common, although it appears fractionally longer billed and a little longer winged. In these respects it resembles Willow Warbler. However, the structural differences from Common Chiffchaff are small and, even in the hand, biometrics have recently been shown to be inconclusive.

Its plumage is more reminiscent of Willow Warbler: a brighter mossy green above and more yellow on the face, throat, upper breast and undertail coverts. It has a bolder face pattern with a stronger supercilium and a weaker eyering. In practice, therefore, it is just as likely to be identified as a Willow Warbler as a Common Chiffchaff. Again, however, the differences are small and unlikely to be conclusive in a vagrant. The legs are generally dark brown.

Songs and calls are key. The typical song comprises three elements: an initial series of notes followed by a characteristic rising *weet weet* and then a rushed succession of notes of the same pitch – *chiff chiff chiff weet weet cha cha cha cha cha*. This typical 'advertising' song is distinctive and very different from both Common Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler. However, the 'conflict' song of Iberian Chiffchaff closely resembles that of Common and birds may switch between the two song types.

There is also the phenomenon of 'mixed singing', not a reference to such switching but to those birds which incorporate both Common and Iberian Chiffchaff elements into the same song. Many such birds are considered to be hybrids from the narrow hybrid zone in the western Pyrenees, but some may also be pure individuals of one species which have learnt the song of the other. The call is distinctive: a high-pitched soft, descending *tseeeu* reminiscent of Siskin or Reed Bunting.

## Willow Warbler

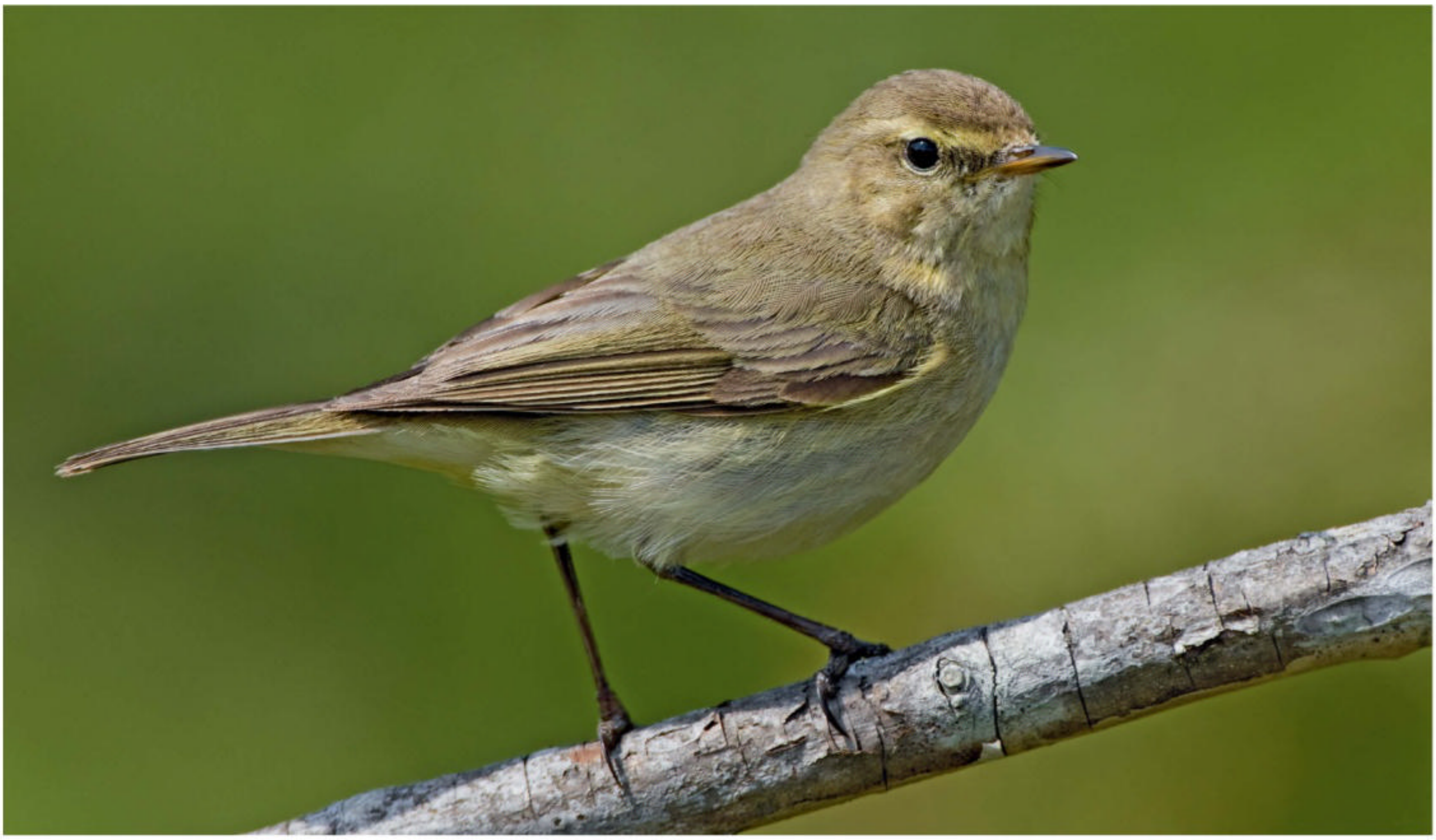
This is a very common species across a very large breeding range extending from Ireland in the west to eastern Siberia in the east. There are three subspecies, though the distinctions between them are subtle and clinal. Those in westernmost Europe belong to the nominate subspecies, those in Scandinavia and western Russia to *acredula*, with the furthest eastern birds referred to as *yakutensis*. All winter in sub-Saharan Africa. It is a common breeder in Britain (although now declining across southern England), arriving in April and departing in early autumn. Continental migrants occur regularly, particularly along North Sea coasts. Winter records are extremely rare.

As befits a long-distance migrant, it has a long and rather pointed wing with a primary projection just shorter than or as long as the tertials.

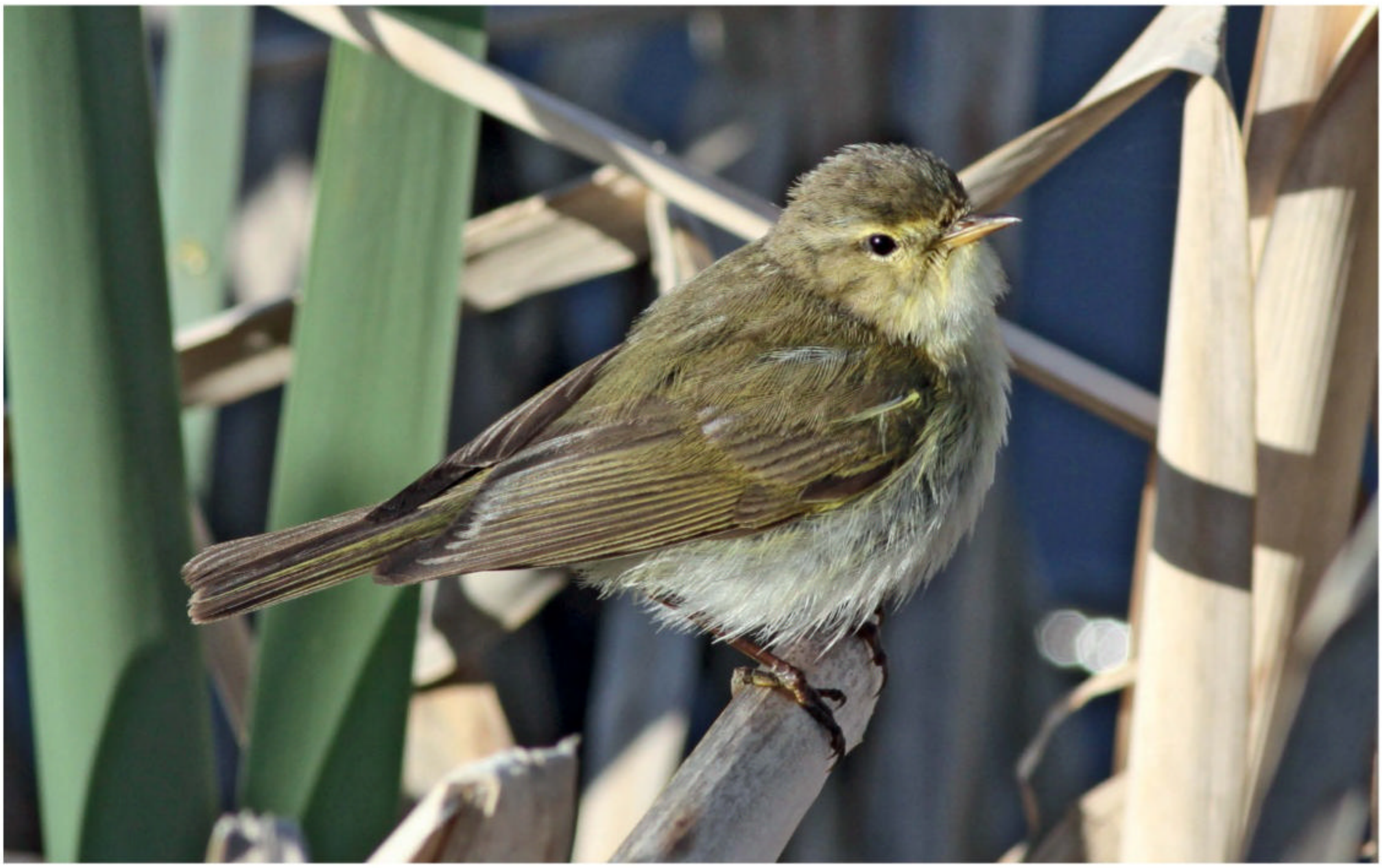
It is a 'green-and-white' bird in spring, with autumn juveniles being very yellow below. Birds with duller grey or brown hues occur in all three subspecies, but are commoner in *acredula* and typical in *yakutensis*. Willow Warblers have quite an 'intense' expression – a function of a well-developed loral line and eyestripe and long and well-defined supercilium. The ear coverts are relatively plain and pale and the eyering is not prominent.

Leg colour is the classic identification feature. Bright orangey legs indicate a Willow Warbler, although some are dark legged, and the identification of such birds should rely on other features.

The song is the familiar silvery cadence, with the call a rising *hweet* confusable with that of Common Redstart.

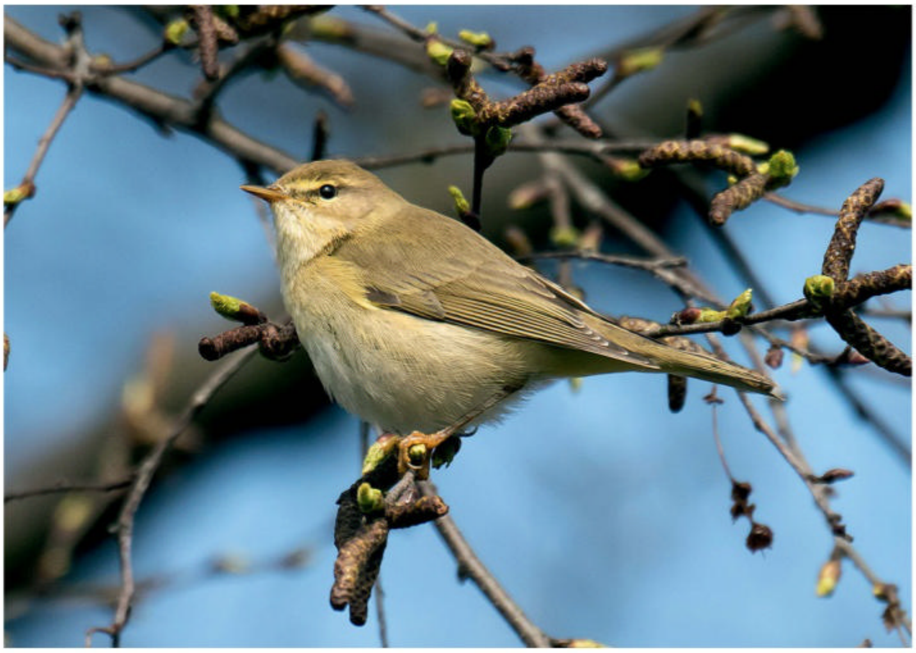

DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

TWO: Common Chiffchaff (Firenzuola, Italy, 1 May 2008). The dark legs immediately catch the eye in this image – a clear pointer to Common Chiffchaff. Some Willow Warblers are dark legged, however, so additional features are needed. Fortunately, this individual offers numerous further clues. Most important is the wing structure, comprising a short primary projection which here can be seen to be significantly shorter than the tertials. 'Softer' features can be found in the face pattern. The supercilium is relatively weak, the eyering is quite prominent and the ear coverts are strongly washed olive. The result is a 'softer' and less 'intense' expression than that of Willow Warbler.


MARK ROBINSON

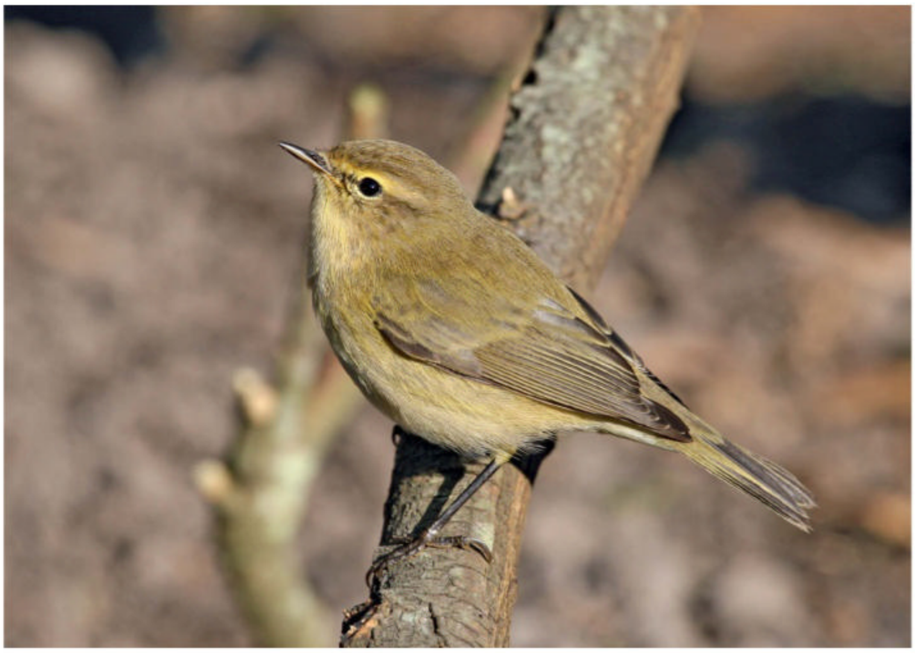
THREE: Iberian Chiffchaff (Grimston, East Yorkshire, 13 April 2014). Facially, this bird appears somewhat intermediate between Willow Warbler and Common Chiffchaff. The supercilium is not especially strong, but the ear coverts are quite plain and the eyering is weak. The primary projection is perhaps a little long for a typical Common Chiffchaff, but certainly not as long as on some Willow Warblers. The legs are neither especially pale nor dark. This bird would be hard to identify and could easily get logged as either a Willow Warbler or a Common Chiffchaff. Its set of features is, however, typical of Iberian Chiffchaff, though certain identification would rely on hearing its song or call.

FOUR: Willow Warbler (Liverpool, 7 April 2015). The clean bright plumage hues of this bird coupled with the strong supercilium, pale ear coverts and weak eyering immediately suggest Willow Warbler, a diagnosis which can be readily confirmed by reference to its orangey legs and, in particular, to its noticeably long primary projection, here easily as long as the tertials. The increasing spacing between the primary tips (not shown on Common Chiffchaff) also indicates that the wing is quite pointed as well as long – typical for a long-distance migrant.



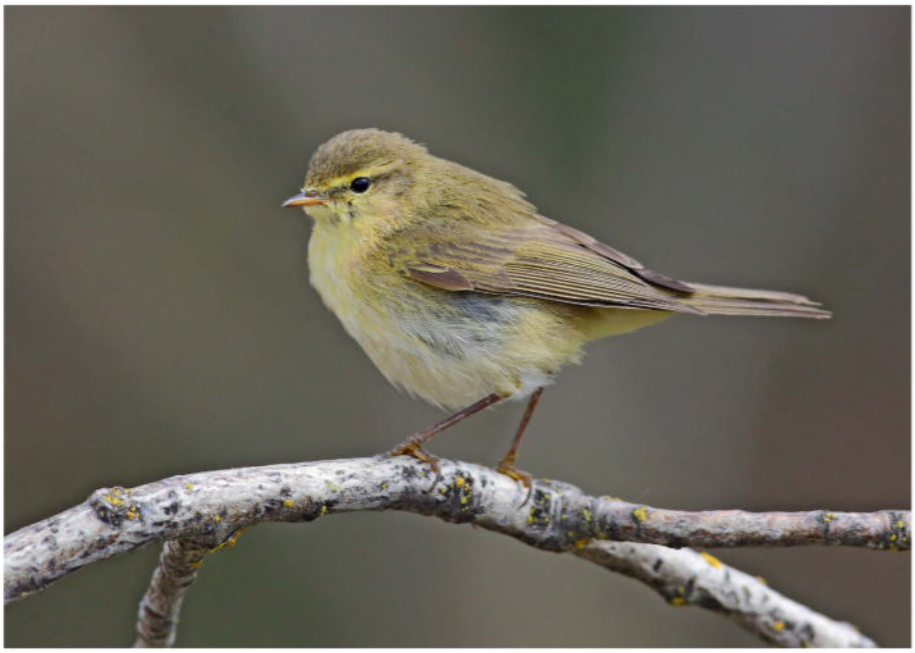
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

FIVE: Common Chiffchaff (Ouessant, France, 28 September 2008). This lovely portrait showcases all the classic features of Common Chiffchaff. These include rather 'swarthy' olive plumage hues and a weak face pattern with a poorly defined supercilium, strongly olive-washed ear coverts and a prominent eyering. The primary projection is short, with the closely bunched primary tips indicating the rather rounded wing of a short-distance migrant. Finally, the legs are clearly blackish.

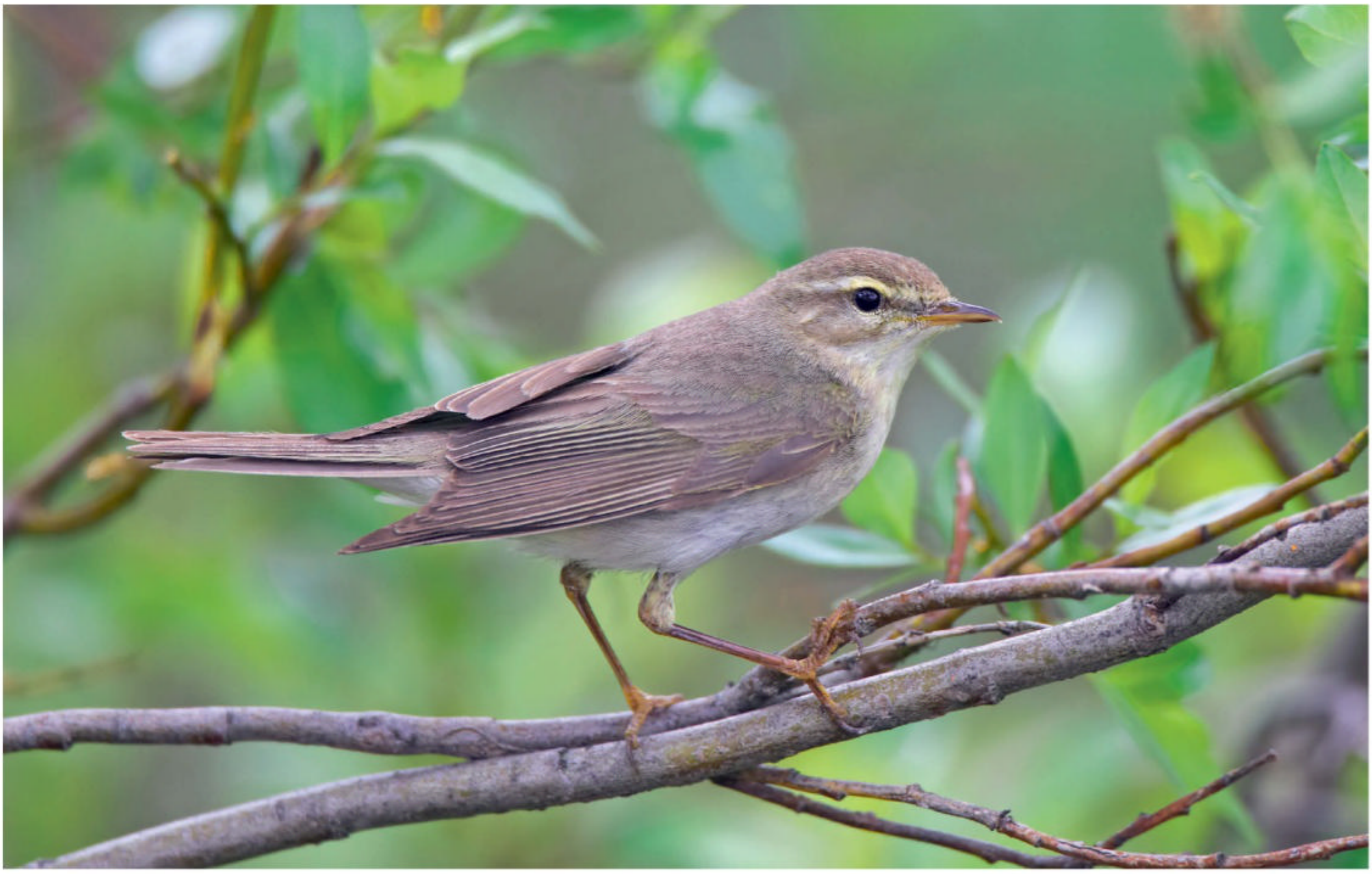


AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD

SIX: Iberian Chiffchaff (Valladolid, Spain, 22 March 2016). Rather like the bird in photo 3 (page 35), this individual gives somewhat contradictory clues. With its bright green upperparts, pale ear coverts and weak eyering, it most resembles a Willow Warbler, and the legs, too, are pale. However, the primary projection is on the short side. This is in fact another Iberian Chiffchaff but, in Britain, songs or calls would be required to prove it. The yellow wash on the face and undertail coverts is typical of Iberian Chiffchaff, but is hardly diagnostic.



CARLOS BOCOS


MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

SEVEN: Willow Warbler (Kuusamo, Finland, 9 June 2007). Based on the face pattern, wing structure and leg colour, this is clearly a Willow Warbler. It lacks, however, the bright green and yellow hues typically seen on the species in Britain. This much paler and greyer plumage (lacking both green and yellow) can be shown by birds throughout the northern part of the range (even in Scotland), but it is most typically found in birds from further east, in Scandinavia and Russia. These latter birds are of the continental subspecies *acredula*.

## Find your own Common and Iberian Chiffchaffs and Willow Warbler

Common Chiffchaff is found in all parts of Britain apart from the highest uplands, from northern Scotland to Scilly. It is, however, most strongly associated with broadleaved woodland and scrub with trees, and that is where sometimes quite dense populations will be found. In spring it will announce itself with its signature song, but it calls year round.

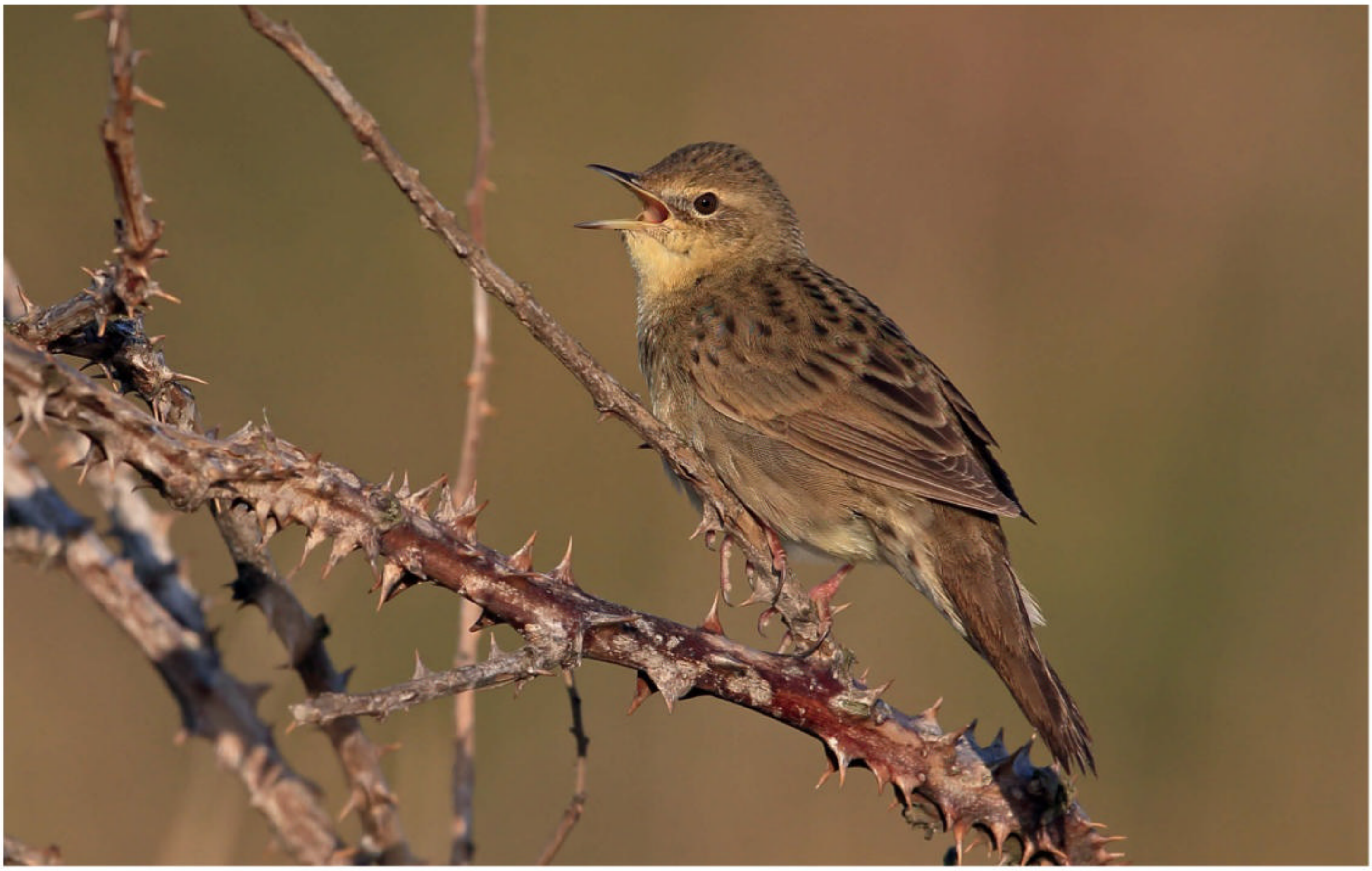
Winter sees the species take to the lowlands, where it becomes more frequent on the coast and can turn up in reedbeds, scrub, gardens and small stands of young trees such as willow, alder and sycamore. At this time of year, it is primarily an English and Welsh species, and most numerous in the milder south.

Records of Iberian Chiffchaff are now annual, and the species has been recorded in all parts of Britain, although the lion's share of reports come from Cornwall, Devon, Norfolk and East Yorkshire. It has never been identified in autumn here, but individuals have held territories throughout spring into June, and in 2015 a pair bred in West Glamorgan, raising two broods of chicks, totalling seven fledged birds. There is potential for an autumn discovery (and one pending record), though birds are likely to be silent and in juvenile plumage, and consequently extremely difficult to identify.

The liquid descent of a Willow Warbler song is one of the first signs that spring migration is fully under way, and it is via this song that the species is most likely to initially be detected in spring. Come summer, it is even more widely distributed than Common Chiffchaff, filling Britain coast to coast, with the only gaps being in smaller areas of the Fens, parts of London and Shetland and the very tops of mountains. However, there has been a decline in England balanced by an increase in Scotland and Ireland. Any wooded area, even large gardens, could produce this species, though it is completely absent in winter, which it spends in sub-Saharan Africa.

# Grasshopper, Savi’s and River Warblers

Words by Andy Stoddart



ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

ONE: Grasshopper Warbler (Cley Marshes NWT, Norfolk, 21 April 2015). This is a classic portrait of a Grasshopper Warbler: perched on top of a bramble bush and, bill wide open, delivering its distinctive ‘reeling’ song. Clearly shown here is the characteristic ‘head up tail down’ posture, the softly streaked upperparts and the well-marked streaks in the undertail coverts. Singing birds such as this provide virtually our only opportunity to study this subtly attractive but enigmatic species.

‘Little brown jobs’ can be the bane of the birder at any level, and there are few more elusive and harder to identify than the bush warblers of the genus *Locustella*. Several species get their names from their buzzing grasshopper- or locust-like songs, and this is often how they are first detected in the field. Patience could reveal a glimpse, but it can take several such views to piece together an identification. ID expert Andy Stoddart advises what to look for and how to recognise the ‘default’ species and two much rarer visitors to Britain.

# Basic Principles

*Locustella* warblers are among the most secretive and hence most enigmatic birds of all. In spring most of us will come across a Grasshopper Warbler, if only by sound, but there are two other vagrant possibilities to bear in mind: Savi's and River Warblers. Both are very rare, but have the potential to turn up almost anywhere with suitable habitat.

## Grasshopper Warbler

This species has a large Palearctic breeding range stretching from Ireland in the west to Mongolia in the east. The nominate subspecies breeds in western and central Europe and western Russia, and winters in west sub-Saharan Africa. Two or perhaps three other forms breed from the Caucasus across Asia, and some of them winter in the Indian subcontinent.

Grasshopper Warbler is exclusively a summer visitor to Britain. A relatively early migrant, it appears from mid-April and can occasionally be numerous at west coast bird observatories in spring. For most of us, however, it is not a common species. A typical encounter begins by hearing its distinctive, high-pitched, insect-like reeling song emanating from deep inside cover. Although the song carries for long distances, the bird itself can be notoriously hard to place, and to make matters worse, the song appears to move around as the bird turns its head.

Eventually, however, and with a little patience, it may be possible to locate the bird deep inside its chosen bush and sometimes it can even emerge onto a high perch to sing in full view. Although it sometimes sings during the day, it is more of a night vocalist and most likely to be heard at dawn or dusk.

## Savi's Warbler

Savi's also breeds widely across Europe and Asia and winters discontinuously in sub-Saharan Africa. The nominate subspecies occurs across Europe and western Russia, with two other forms occurring across Asia.

This species used to be a regular, albeit very rare, breeding bird in Britain, largely confined to East Anglia and the South-East. In recent times, however, its appearances as a breeding bird have become ever more sporadic and it is now best regarded as simply a vagrant. Indeed it is now treated as a full rarity by the Rarities Committee.

It occurs mainly in spring and is invariably located by its song. This resembles the reeling of Grasshopper Warbler in its persistence, but is distinctly harsher and lower pitched. Furthermore, while Grasshopper Warbler favours bushes as songposts (albeit often within reedbeds), Savi's Warbler is a true reedbed bird and usually sings from the reeds themselves. This makes it particularly difficult to see, but again, with patience, it may be possible to see one ascend to the top of a reed stem. It is also a mainly night singer, best sought early and late in the day.

## River Warbler

There is also a third *Locustella* possibility to consider in spring: River Warbler. This species breeds across eastern Europe and western Russia, wintering much further to the south in south-east Africa.

It has always been rare in Britain, with just 44 records to the end of 2013. These are split between spring and autumn, and while the latter are found at the usual coastal migration spots (almost exclusively in the Northern Isles), spring birds have occurred much more widely and randomly across the country. This is a species which could occur almost anywhere. Spring occurrences fall late in the season, either in the closing days of May or, more typically, in June or even July.

As with the other *Locustella* species described here, a spring River Warbler is unlikely to be discovered unless it is in song. Fortunately, this is quite distinctive. Though sharing the persistent, insect-like quality of its relatives, it does not give a steady reel, emitting instead a curious rhythmic, mechanical, pulsing *dzi … dzi … dzi … dzi*, often delivered from high in a bush. This is a loud song that will carry a significant distance, making its detection more likely. Again, the species is more of a night singer.

## Identification

All three of the species featured here share the same *Locustella* structural characters: a long head and slender bill, long legs, strongly curved outer edge to the closed primaries, pale outer web to the second primary, broad, strongly graduated tail and very long undertail coverts almost reaching the tail tip.

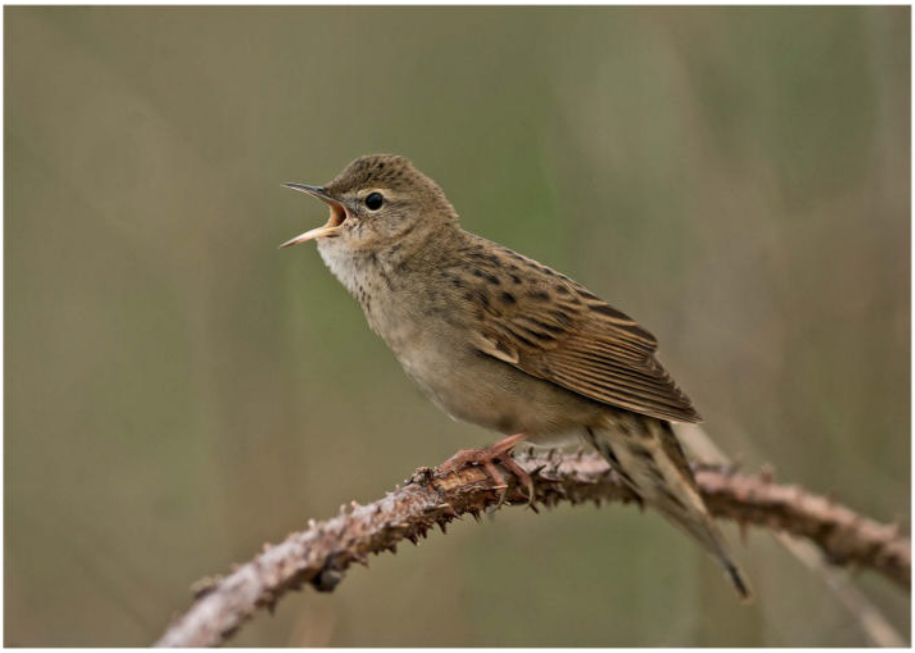
Grasshopper Warbler is about the size of a Sedge Warbler, but Savi's and especially River Warblers are a size larger. However, such differences are not especially helpful in the field, and to identify your candidate to species you will need to note some plumage detail.

The separation of Grasshopper Warbler from its relatives is not too challenging on a good view. The 'mottled' or 'ruffled' pattern of dark feather centres in the crown and upperparts place it in the 'streaked' group of *Locustellas* (along with Lanceolated and Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers) and readily distinguish it from the plain-backed Savi's and River Warblers. It is also streaked in the undertail coverts, a feature often readily visible on a singing bird.

Our European Grasshopper Warblers come in two colour morphs, 'brown and white' and 'olive and yellow', but both types are similarly mottled above. The major pitfall is getting poor views (or good views in poor light) and concluding that the upperparts are unstreaked. A bit of misinterpretation of the song may then lead to an incorrect identification as Savi's.

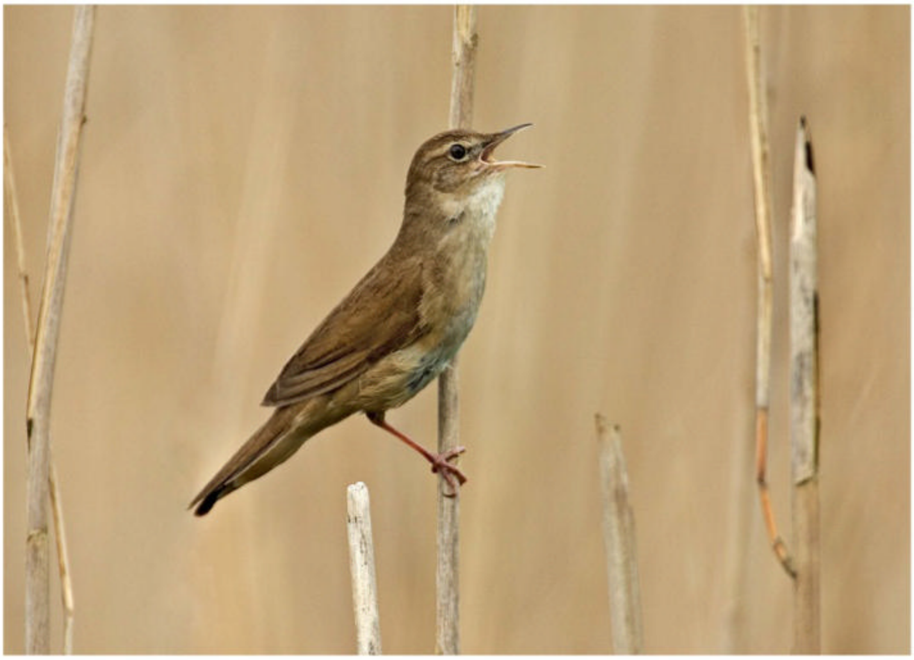
Savi's and River Warblers are very similar, though the latter should show a neat 'necklace' of blurry striations across the upper breast and very broadly pale-tipped and dark-based undertail coverts. Savi's is usually entirely plain below (although some show some indistinct light lower throat spotting) and the undertail coverts are either uniform or only weakly tipped pale.

TWO: Grasshopper Warbler (Hightown, Lancashire, 21 April 2007). This singing bird shows the structural features shared by all *Locustella* warblers – a long, slim body, long tail, very long undertail coverts and a subtle curve to the leading edge of the wing. This bird would be announcing its identity as a Grasshopper Warbler by its song and this identification is quickly confirmed by the weakly streaked, rather 'ruffled' appearance to the crown, mantle and scapulars, fine spotting across the lower throat and upper breast and heavy arrowhead marks in the undertail coverts. This is a rather brown-and-white individual.



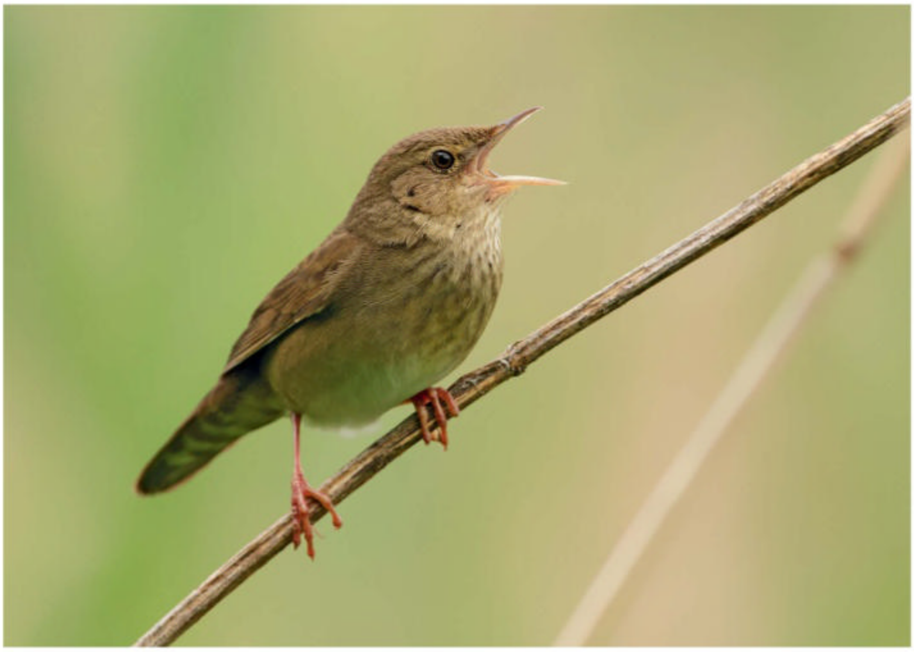
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

THREE: Savi's Warbler (Zederik, The Netherlands, 28 April 2005). The long undertail coverts and the slightly curved leading edge to the wing identify this bird as a *Locustella* warbler, as does the fine dark loral line giving a slightly more 'sharp' facial expression than the more 'bland-faced' *Acrocephalus* warblers such as Reed Warbler. Note also the relatively long (and bright pink) legs – an adaptation to a life spent creeping about in dense vegetation. The plain warm brown upperparts, unmarked throat and breast and smoothly buff-washed undertail coverts all confirm this bird as a Savi's Warbler, as would its song.

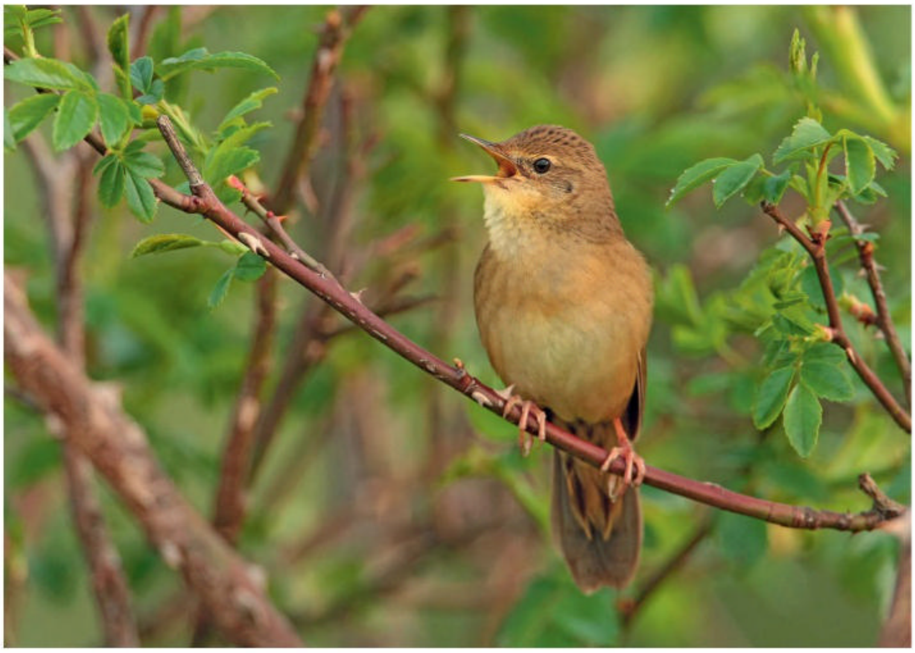


HANS GEBUIS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FOUR: River Warbler (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Germany, 20 May 2013). Some additional structural features of *Locustella* warblers are shown to perfection here – a long, spiky bill, a long, smooth forehead, long toes and a broad, strongly rounded tail. In terms of plumage, this bird shows apparently plain, unstreaked upperparts but strong vertical smudgy markings across the breast and strong transverse brown-and-white barring across the undertail coverts: it is a River Warbler. In life, this bird would be visibly trembling to the rhythm of its highly distinctive pulsing song.

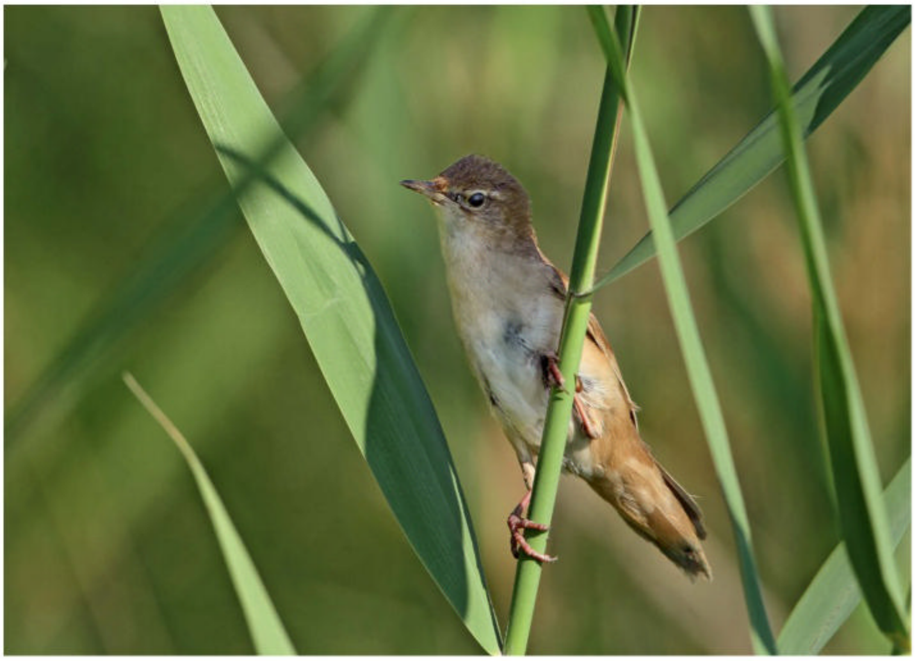


STEFAN PFÜTZKE (WWW.GREEN-LENS.DE)



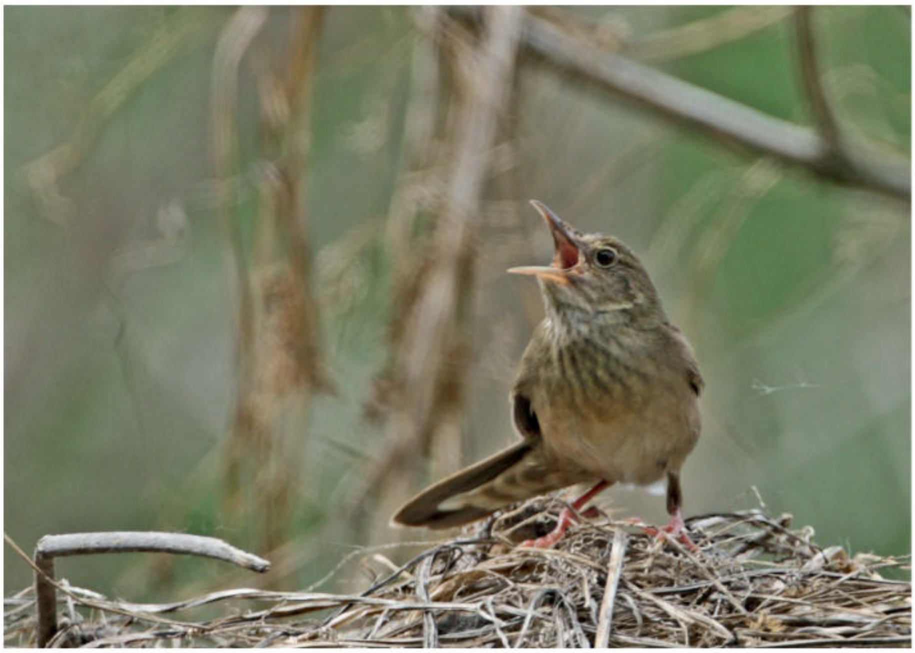
STEVE ARLOW (WWW.BIRDERSPLAYGROUND.CO.UK)

FIVE: Grasshopper Warbler (Two Tree Island, Essex, 17 April 2011). With its spiky bill, sloping forehead, long, broad, rounded tail, long undertail coverts and long toes, this is a classic *Locustella*. Its underparts appear unstreaked, so could it be a Savi's Warbler? A quick look at the undertail coverts disproves this theory, for they exhibit the classic heavy and well-defined arrowhead markings of a Grasshopper Warbler, while soft streaking is visible in the crown. This is an instructive bird, therefore, a reminder that some Grasshopper Warblers can show such weak throat/breast spotting as to appear unmarked. Note that this individual is also more olive and yellow than that in photo 2.



STEFAN PFÜTZKE (WWW.GREEN-LENS.DE)

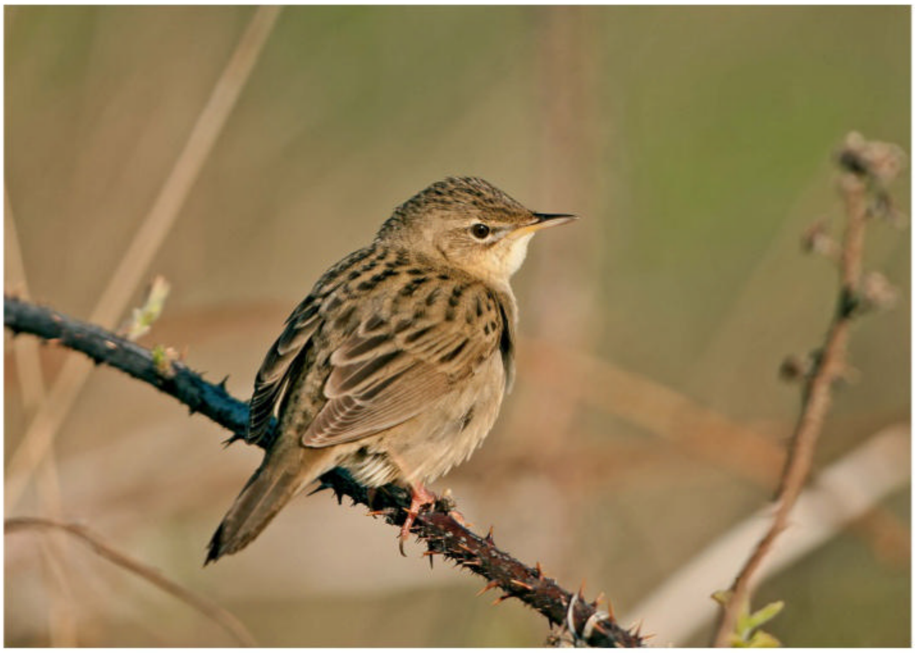
SIX: Savi's Warbler (Hortobágy, Hungary, 16 June 2011). This bird also appears wholly unmarked below, but a check of the undertail coverts shows that this is indeed a Savi's Warbler. This feather tract is typically washed a plain bright buff in this species. Also visible here is a plain, unstreaked crown, the typical 'sharp' facial expression of a *Locustella* warbler and, again, the long legs and toes. The reedbed habitat is entirely normal for this species.



NEIL BOWMAN

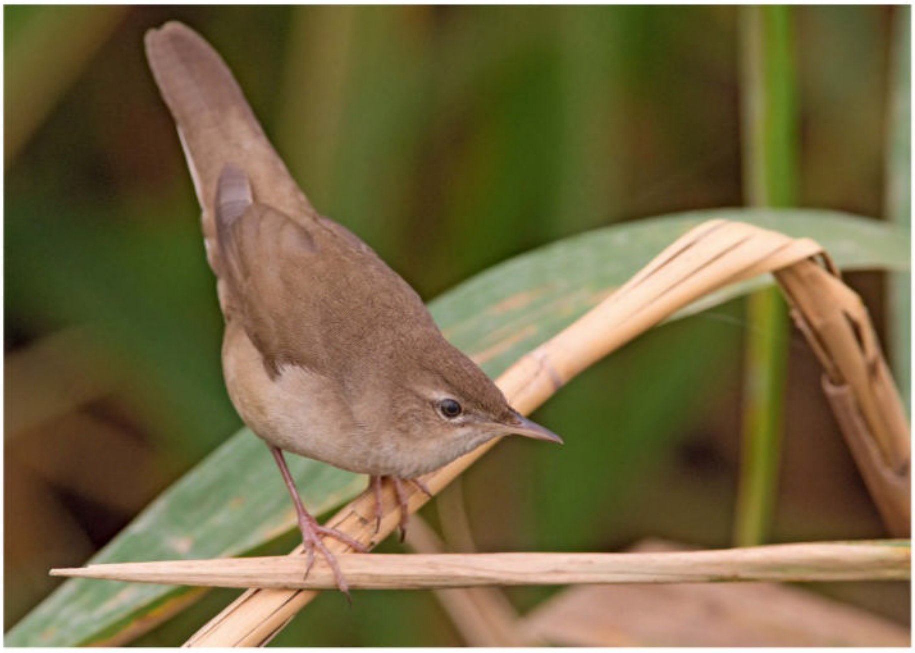
SEVEN: River Warbler (Hortobágy, Hungary, 15 May 2012). Head on, this singing River Warbler is easily identified, showing to perfection the characteristic long blurry streaks right across the breast and the boldly brown-and-white barred undertail coverts. In life, this bird would already have grabbed the attention with its rhythmic pulsing song. In this position the true breadth of the *Locustella* tail can also be appreciated, as can the length of the undertail coverts which reach close to the end of the tail.

EIGHT: Grasshopper Warbler (Hightown, Lancashire, 29 April 2008). This back-on view of a Grasshopper Warbler provides a good opportunity to examine the nature of its upperpart streaking. The classic slightly mottled effect is caused by the fact that each mantle and scapular feather has a thin pale brown tip which disrupts what would otherwise be continuous streaking. Also easy to see in this portrait are the soft crown streaking and two typical *Locustella* features: a thin dark loral line and a curved outer edge to the wing.



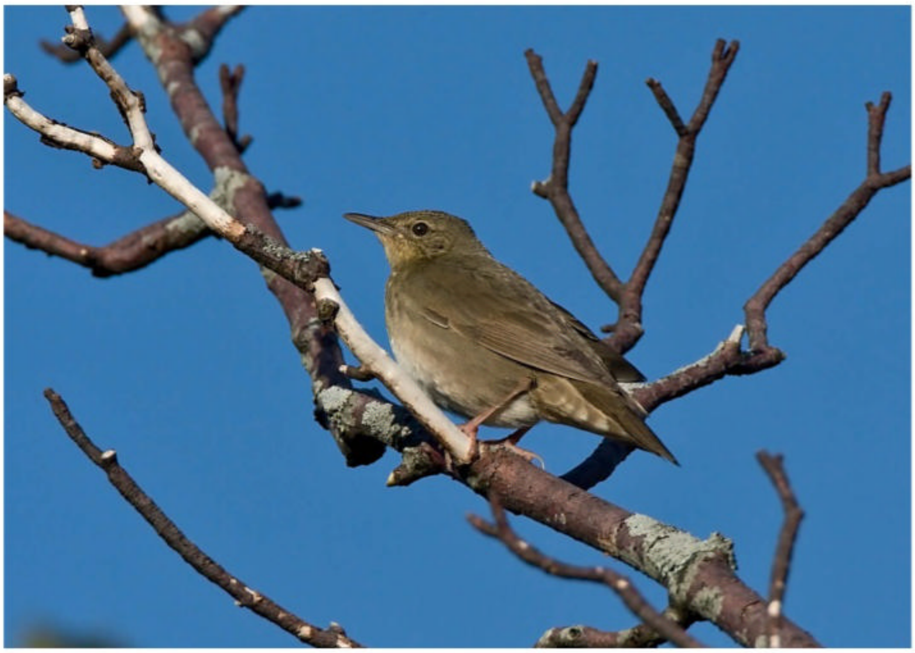
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

NINE: Savi's Warbler (Jahra Pools, Kuwait, 1 March 2012). This bird is strikingly and obviously plain above and, at first glance, it resembles an *Acrocephalus* warbler. However, its true identity as a *Locustella* is confirmed by its quite long, spiky bill, low, sloping forehead, long, tubular body, long and very broad rounded tail, strongly curved outer edge to the wing and long bright pink legs and toes. The face pattern can also be examined closely, here showing the typical *Locustella* thin loral line. With such unequivocally plain upperparts, this has to be either a Savi's or a River Warbler, and a glance at the wholly unmarked lower throat and breast confirm that it is the former.

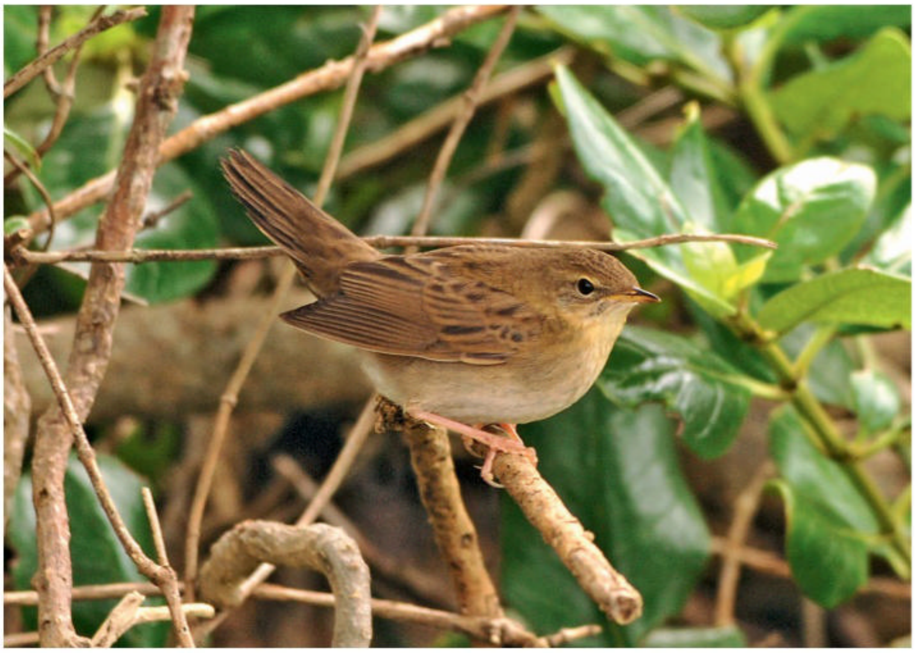


ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

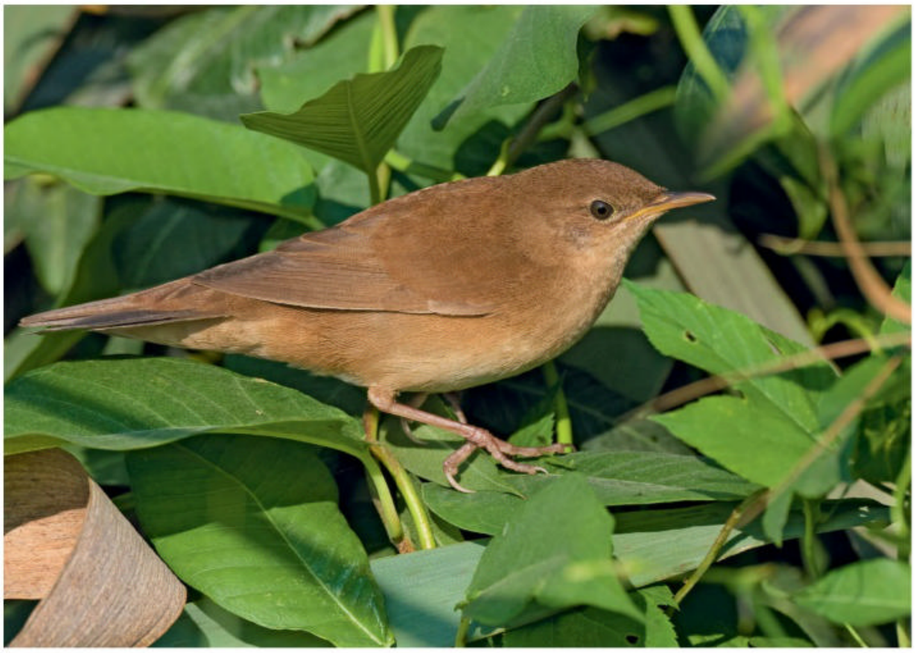
TEN: River Warbler (Applecross, Highland, 11 July 2009). With this bill, head and wing shape and such long undertail coverts, this is clearly a *Locustella* warbler. Its upperparts appear genuinely unmarked, so the choice is narrowed to the two plain-backed species. The breast pattern is hard to see here, but a suggestion of vertical blurry streaking can be seen at the breast-sides, strongly suggesting River Warbler. The undertail coverts pattern confirms this diagnosis, the brown feather bases and broad pale tips being characteristic of this species. Typically, this River Warbler is a slightly 'colder' earth-brown colour above than the brighter buff Savi's Warbler.



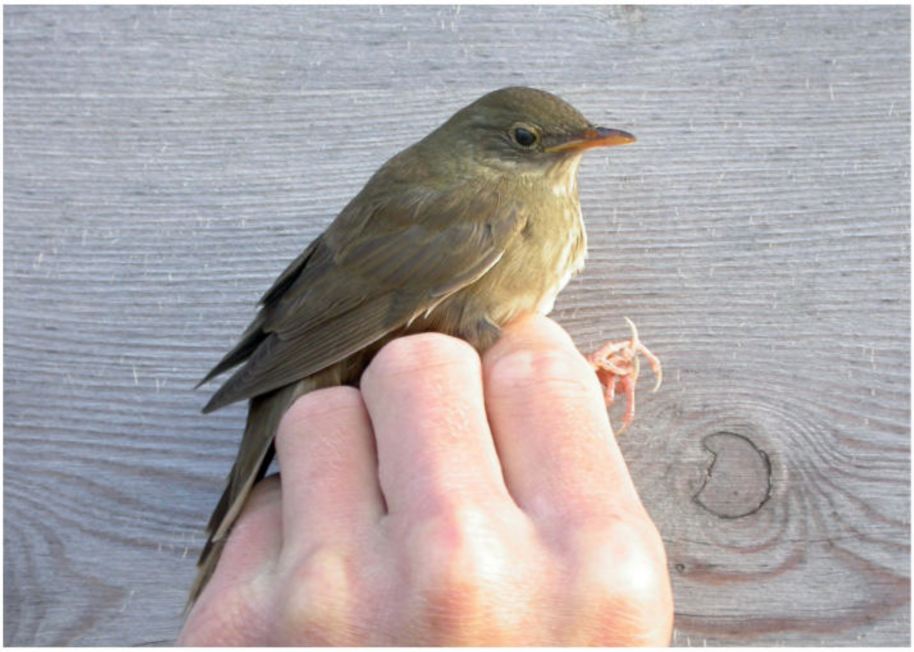
ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)


ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

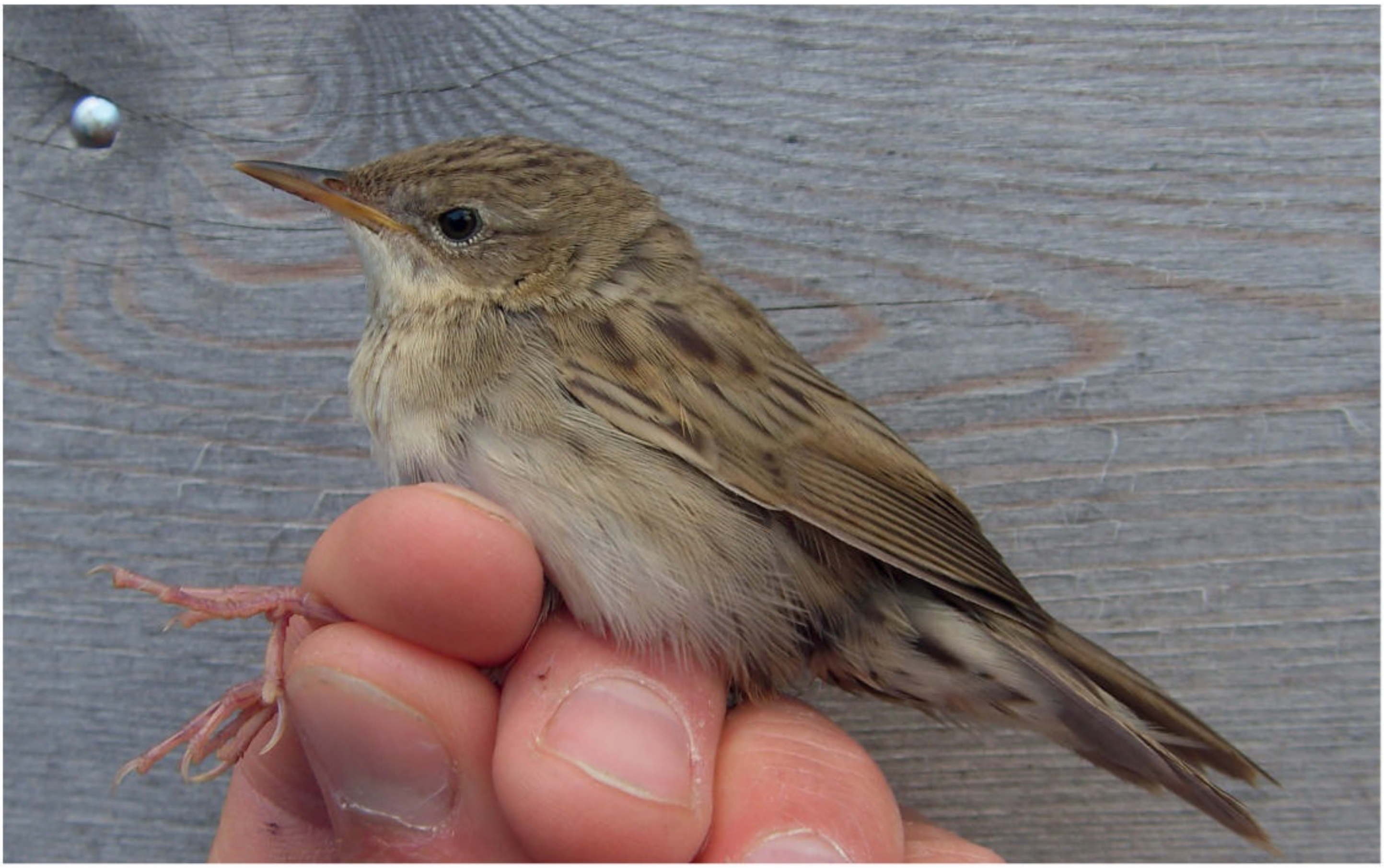
ELEVEN: Grasshopper Warbler (Garrison, St Mary's, Scilly, 9 October 2005). Autumn migrant *Locustella* warblers rarely give anything more than a flight view or perhaps a quick, half-obscured glimpse. A view of this quality is most unusual. In autumn, it is vital to be quick, homing in on key features in the few seconds available. Here, the softly mottled upperparts (note also the diffuse dark feather centres in the uppertail coverts) readily rule out the two rare plain-backed species.


ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

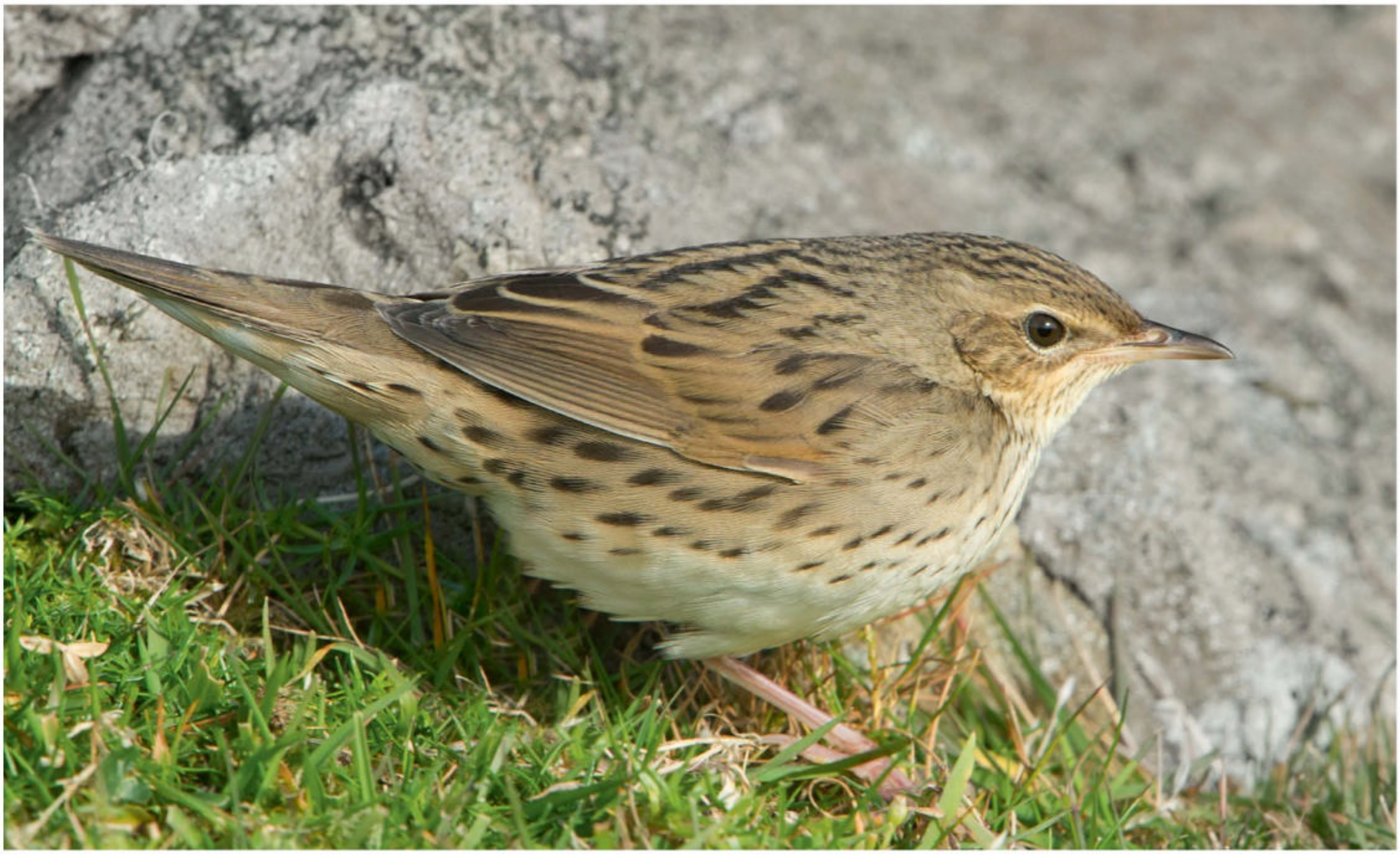
TWELVE: Savi's Warbler (Tuscany, Italy, 12 September 2009). This too would be an exceptional view of an autumn *Locustella*! Here the overwhelming impression is of plain uniformity and bright buff plumage hues. These two features alone suggest Savi's Warbler, an identification confirmed by the wholly unmarked breast and the plain buff-washed undertail coverts. An additional generic feature of *Locustellas* is also visible here: a contrasting pale outer web to the long outermost primary.


ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

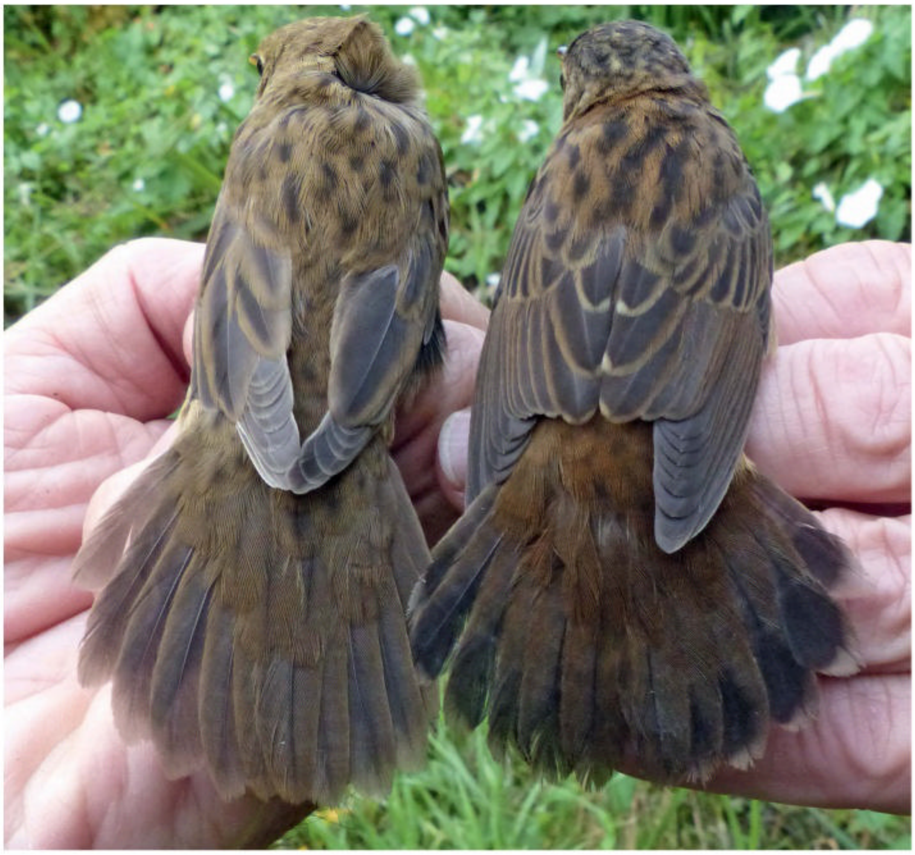
THIRTEEN: River Warbler (Fair Isle, Shetland, 11 September 2012). This plain-looking *Locustella* is clearly either a Savi's or a River Warbler. At first sight, its relatively plain breast might suggest the former, but autumn River Warblers can show much reduced breast streaking and in fact what is visible here strongly indicates the latter species. The real clincher would be the undertail coverts, but unfortunately they are obscured here. Note that the pale outer web to the outermost primary – a generic *Locustella* feature – is visible too.


ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

FOURTEEN: Eastern Grasshopper Warbler (Fair Isle, Shetland, 20 September 2012). Sadly, *Locustella* identification can be more complicated than the three-way choice presented in this article. This bird is clearly streaked above, so cannot be either of the plain-backed species, but it looks tiny. Could it be a Lanceolated Warbler, the small Russian-breeding counterpart of Grasshopper Warbler (and an annual vagrant to Britain)? It is in fact a Grasshopper Warbler of one of the small eastern forms *straminea* or *mongolica*, but confirming which is problematic, however, and would need to rely on DNA analysis. The bird pictured here is to date the only proven occurrence in Britain.


ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

FIFTEEN: Lanceolated Warbler (Fair Isle, Shetland, 2 October 2012). This similarly small and compact-looking streaky *Locustella* shows a convincing set of Lanceolated Warbler features and can be confidently identified as such. Note the strongly streaked upperparts with the dark feather centres reaching the feather tip and therefore aligning to form continuous streaks. Also obvious in this exceptional image are a very short primary projection, crisply contrasting dark tertial centres, short dark marks in the undertail coverts and obvious streaking in the breast leading into drop-shaped marks in the rear flanks.



ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

SIXTEEN: Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler (left) and Grasshopper Warbler (right) (Titchfield Haven NNR, Hampshire, 6 September 2014). These two apparently similar streaked *Locustellas* represent two species. On the right is a Grasshopper Warbler, while the bird on the left is a vagrant Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler from Siberia. Note the latter's dark grey hues in the crown and nape, the bright slightly rufous tones and very heavy black streaking in the upperparts, a rufous cast to the rump and subtly darker tail feathers with thin greyish-white tips to all bar the central feathers. Also visible are small whitish 'spots' formed where the outer fringes to the tertials extend around the feather tip onto the inner web.

# Find your own *Locustella* warblers

Grashopper Warbler can't be said to be a common species, with a breeding population estimated at just 13,000 pairs. It is sparsely distributed in summer in damp, tussocky grassland, marsh and young conifer plantations over the majority of Britain and Ireland, bar the very highest areas. This secretive species gets much harder to see after July once its chicks have hatched, but can still be present during August and early September, when luck can provide fleeting views in appropriate habitat or at coastal migration watchpoints and bird observatories.

Decreasing over much of the country, Grasshopper Warbler is Red-listed as being of conservation concern, but there are still healthy and slightly increasing populations in north-west Scotland, south-west Ireland and Wales, though ungrazed and openly vegetated sites could produce a reeling bird almost anywhere.

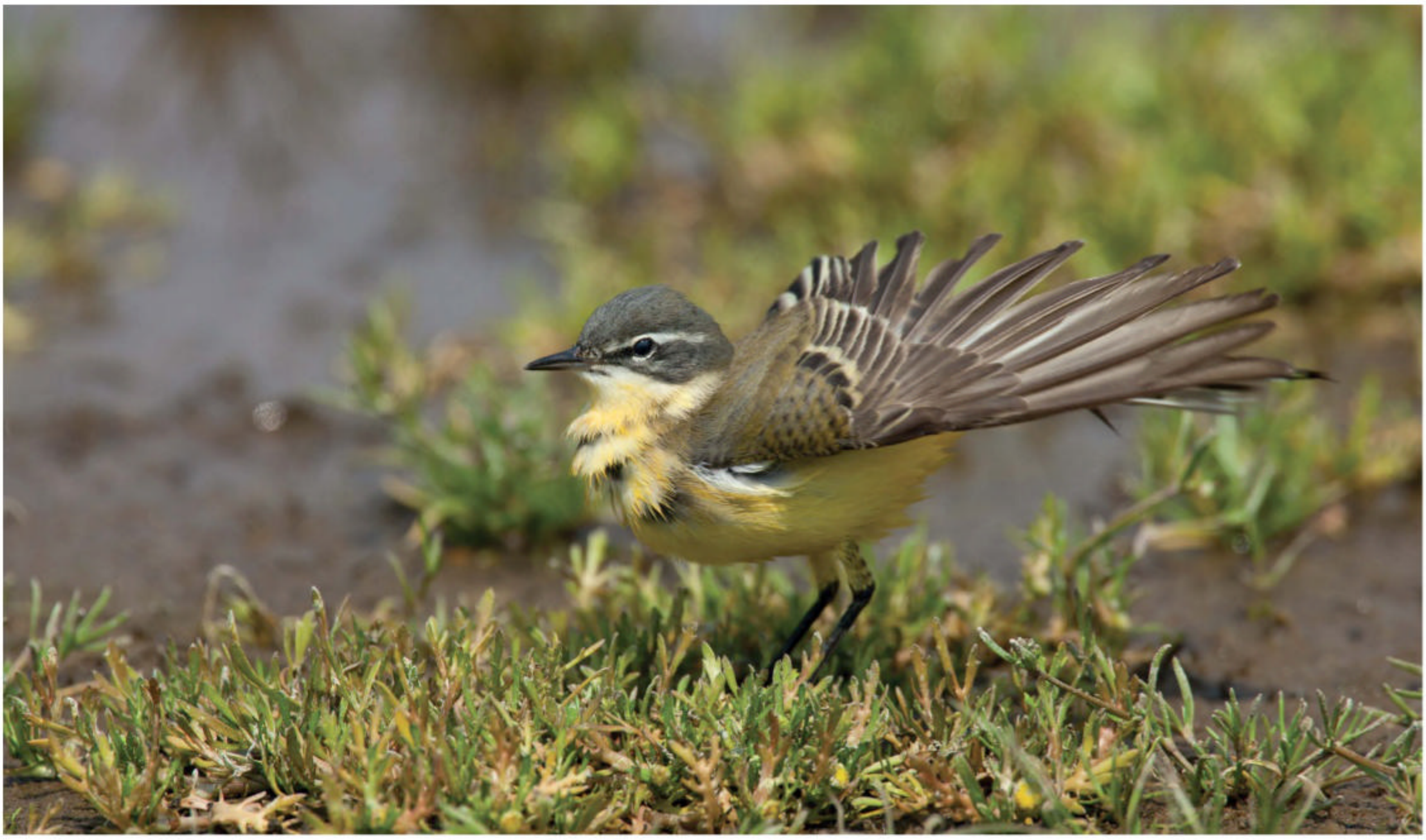
Savi's Warbler is a far rarer species despite being a former breeder in a few southern parts of England and Wales. However, many extensive wetland reserves in the southern two-thirds of the country have had a singing male at some point in the last two decades. Recent long-staying birds have attracted attention at Tacumshin, Co Wexford (T 0406), Newport Wetlands (ST 3782), Blacktoft Sands RSPB, East Yorkshire (S E8423), Wicken Fen NT, Cambridgeshire (TL 5570), Lakenheath Fen RSPB (TL 7286), Minsmere RSPB (TM 4766) and Walberswick NNR (TM 4773), Suffolk, and even as far north as Loch of Strathbeg RSPB, Aberdeenshire (NK 0758).

The species tends to require extensive reedbeds, and it is worth checking any wetland reserve which features a large stand. It is worth familiarising yourself with the song, as adjacent habitats can also hold Grasshopper Warbler, which sounds confusingly similar to the uninitiated.

River Warbler is rarer still, being less than annual. It breeds in damp deciduous riverside and swamp habitats within range, and consequently often turns up in similar habitats in Britain. The majority of records (more than half at 23 birds) have been from Shetland, but others have shown up at more compatible locations, with recent long-stayers at Beachy Head, East Sussex (TV 5895), Thorpe, Norfolk (TM 4398), and Applecross, Highland (NG 7144), being particularly well-attended by birders. However, it is hard to predict where the next one will turn up outside the Northern Isles.

# Blue-headed, Spanish and Ashy-headed Wagtails

Words by Andy Stoddart



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

ONE: Blue-headed Wagtail (Lesvos, Greece, 4 April 2007). The 'Yellow Wagtails' are a notoriously difficult group, but this bird at least is identifiable. Its blue-grey head with a moderately prominent full length supercilium, slightly pale-centred ear coverts and extensive pale yellow in the throat – albeit with some white in the upper throat and the throat-sides – identify this as a Blue-headed Wagtail.

The majority of birders are pleased to find their first Yellow Wagtail of the spring in Britain, but excitement can be added to this feeling by the possibility of one of the scarce or rare Continental subspecies, including several lookalike forms with blue-grey heads. ID expert Andy Stoddart helps you to put a name on your own individual of the *flava* wagtail complex, while underlining the subtleties and problems with these extremely similar forms.

# Basic Principles

The Yellow Wagtail complex is notorious for its proliferation of subspecies and its great variety of age, sex and season-related plumages. The situation in Britain is relatively straightforward, with *flavissima* Yellow Wagtail the regular breeding taxon and nominate *flava* Blue-headed Wagtail a somewhat scarcer but nonetheless regular and relatively familiar migrant.

Complicating matters, however, are scarcer, rare or potentially vagrant subspecies from the Continent. What's more, intergrades between the recognised subspecies are frequent (they are the dominant type in some areas), while birds with anomalous plumage resembling a distant subspecies can occur seemingly anywhere. It is no wonder that the Yellow Wagtails have long been a minefield for both birders and taxonomists.

There is, however, some order and structure within the group, with certain groupings discernible. These may allow identification, if not to subspecies level, then at least to the level of a subspecies pair or group. In Europe one such pairing is formed by the two southern subspecies: *iberiae* Spanish Wagtail and *cinereocapilla* Ashy-headed Wagtail. These are sometimes aggregated with *pygmaea* (Egyptian Wagtail) into a proposed new species *Motacilla cinereocapilla*: 'Southern Wagtail' or 'White-throated Wagtail'.

## Spanish Wagtail

This subspecies breeds largely, as its name suggests, in Iberia, but it also nests in north-west Africa and southern France. Spanish Wagtail is not officially on the British list, but it is a likely vagrant and birds apparently of this form have been noted here. It will probably not be too long before one is accepted.

Away from the breeding areas in a British vagrant context, males represent the best identification opportunity. These are mostly blue/grey-headed with white supercilia and therefore most resemble nominate *flava* Blue-headed Wagtail of west-central Europe and western Russia, but although somewhat variable, they generally differ in a number of features. Most notably, they show a clearly demarcated white throat, a rather narrow supercilium, particularly before the eye, and slightly darker forehead, crown, nape, lores and ear coverts. The last feature appears more 'solid', lacking a pale central patch, and the white lower eyering is weak.

Blue-headed Wagtail, by contrast, is characteristically a mid-toned blue on the head with a broader supercilium, often some pale in the central ear coverts and a largely yellow throat. Female *iberiae* are debatably identifiable, but compared with Blue-headed may show a narrower supercilium and a clearly demarcated white throat.

There are complications, however. Some male Blue-headed Wagtails can lack a fully yellow throat, while Spanish Wagtails intergrade regularly with Blue-headed in south-west and west-central France, and with Ashy-headed Wagtails along the French Mediterranean coast (where such birds are in the majority). Intergrades naturally show intermediate characters, so Spanish x Blue-headed intergrades can show significant yellow in the throat, while Spanish x Ashy-headed intergrades tend to show a reduced supercilium.

Other hybrid combinations, such as Blue-headed x *thunbergi* Grey-headed Wagtail (breeding in Fennoscandia and north-west Russia) and Blue-headed x *feldegg* Black-headed Wagtail (south-east Europe) might also resemble Spanish Wagtail.

The most important feature is the call. Most Spanish Wagtails give a harsh, rather rasping *tsrrreeep* call with a strong *rrr* component, very different from the familiar soft call of *flavissima* 'British' Yellow Wagtail and Blue-headed and Grey-headed Wagtails. However, just to confuse matters, they can also sometimes give soft calls, too.

## Ashy-headed Wagtail

This subspecies breeds in Sardinia, Italy, Sicily, Slovenia and north-west Croatia. It is already on the British list, with six accepted records to date, all of males in spring and most occurring in late April, coinciding with the main northward push of Yellow Wagtails from the western Mediterranean.

As with its Iberian cousin, away from the breeding areas males offer the main opportunity. These are dark hooded with no supercilium (or just a trace over and behind the eye) and therefore most resemble Grey-headed Wagtail. However, unlike that subspecies (in which males show a yellow throat), the throat of Ashy-headed Wagtail is white and clearly demarcated. Females closely resemble female *iberiae*, but the supercilium may be even narrower or lacking altogether.

Needless to say, there are caveats here, too. First-summer male Grey-headed Wagtail can lack a fully yellow throat, while Ashy-headed Wagtails intergrade with Blue-headed in eastern France, Austria, Switzerland and the Balkans, and as already described, intergrades with Spanish Wagtail are the dominant type along the French Mediterranean coast. Ashy-headed x Black-headed Wagtails have also been recorded. With all intergrades, intermediate characters are the norm.

As with Spanish Wagtail, vocalisations are important, Ashy-headed Wagtail sharing the same harsh, rasping call.

## Discussion

The easiest way to enjoy these fabulous wagtails is to visit their home ranges and see them in breeding habitat. However, both Spanish and Ashy-headed Wagtails are viable targets in Britain and males should certainly be searched for in spring. In this context it is worth bearing in mind the occurrence patterns of the two main confusion subspecies. Blue-headed Wagtails occur mainly in mid-spring

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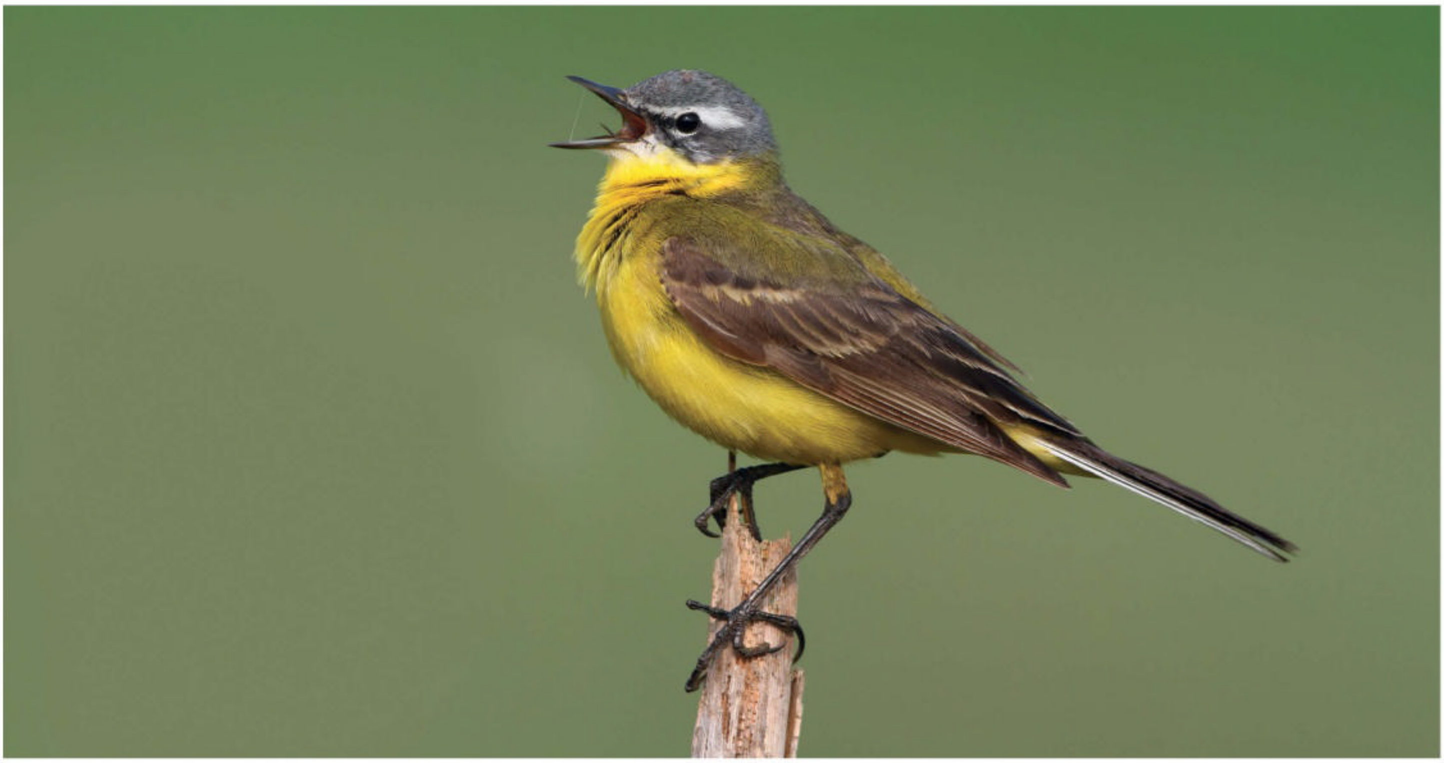
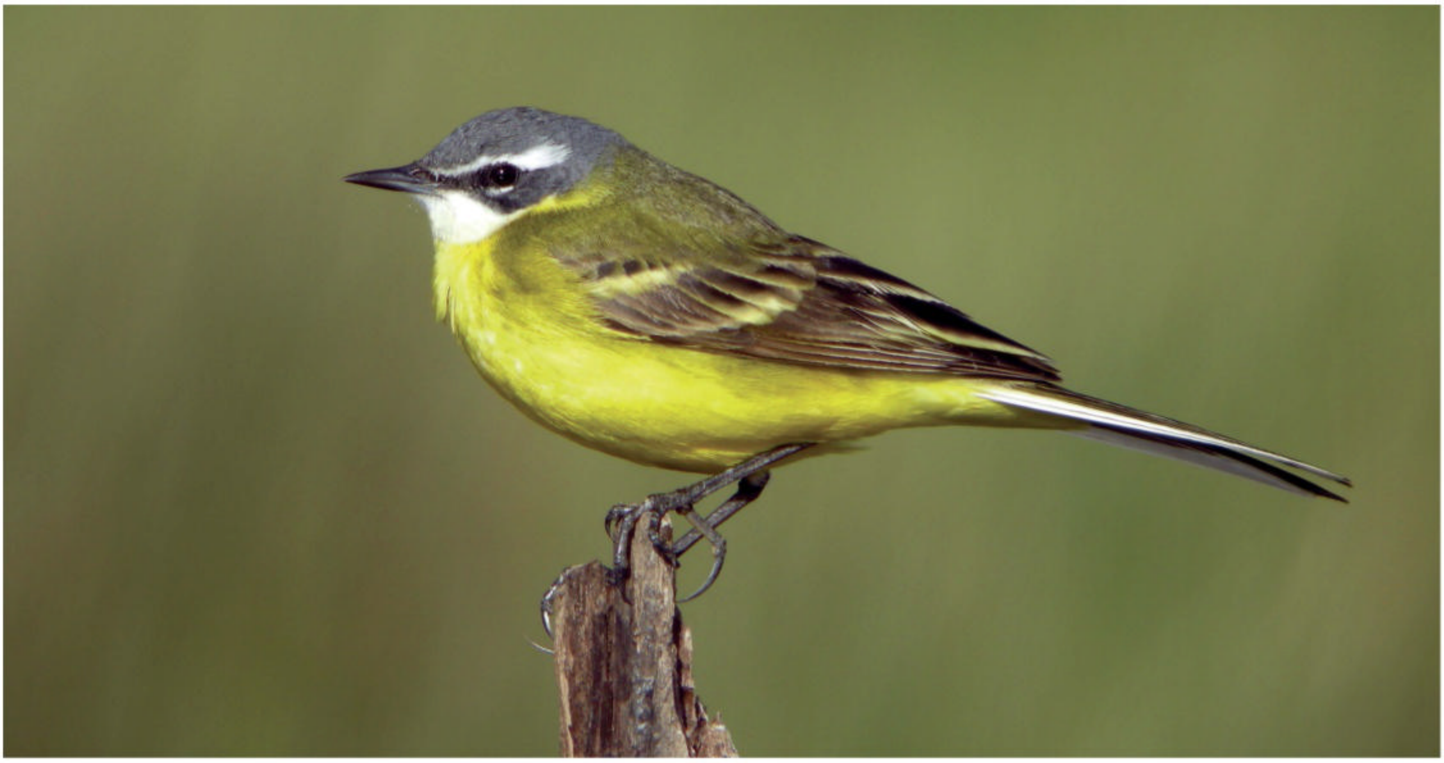
along with northbound *flavissima* Yellow Wagtails and are therefore likely to be present at the best time for a Spanish or Ashy-headed Wagtail. Grey-headed Wagtails, by contrast, occur later in May alongside other Scandinavia-bound migrants.

Due to the complexities outlined above, formal acceptance of any of the rare subspecies might not be a formality. Claims of either should ideally comprise detailed notes, including notes on vocalisations (or, better still, sound recordings) and, preferably, also good photographs. However, if not attributable definitively to either subspecies (for example by virtue of intergrade characters), a harsh-calling bird might still prove acceptable as an 'either/or', that is a Spanish or Ashy-headed Wagtail. Indeed four such birds have already been accepted.



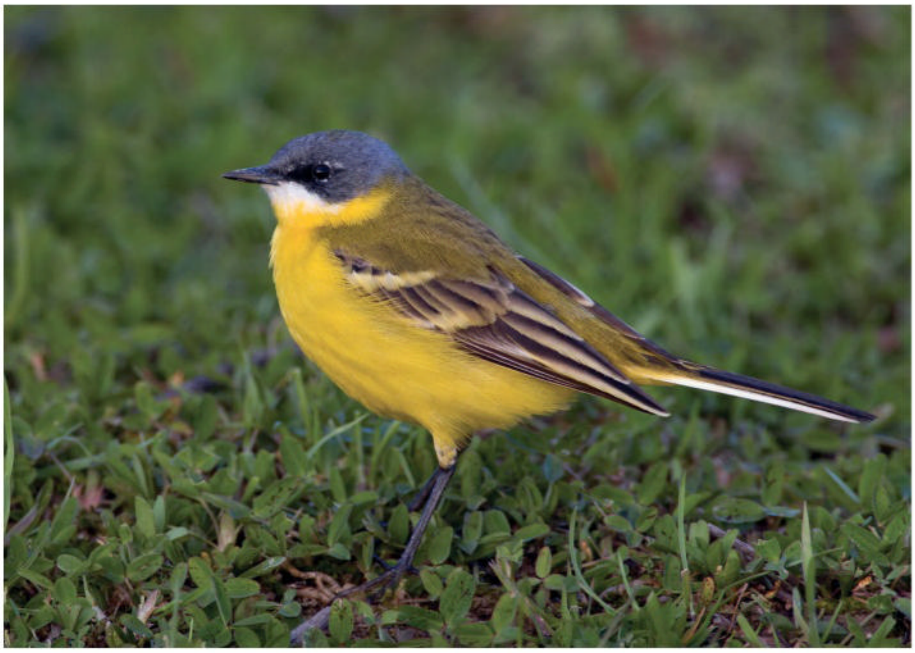
STEFAN PFÜTZKE (WWW.GREEN-LENS.DE)

TWO: Male Blue-headed Wagtail (Bremen, Germany, 4 May 2012). This bright male has a lovely clean blue-grey head and a prominent full supercilium, in this instance flaring a little more strongly behind the eye than the individual in photo one. Pale feathering within the ear coverts, giving a slightly 'hollowed-out' look, is typical of male Blue-headed Wagtail, as is the yellow throat. On this individual almost the entire throat is yellow except for a little white on the uppermost throat.



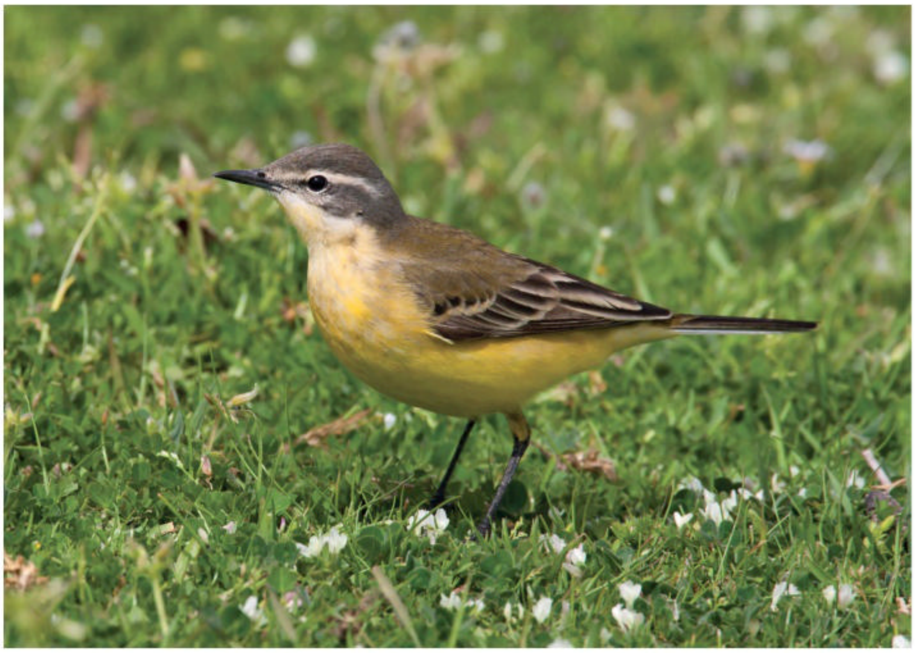
AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD

THREE: Male Spanish Wagtail (Teich, France, 7 April 2010). This Spanish Wagtail is superficially very similar to the preceding bird; indeed the length and breadth of the supercilum is little different. Note, however, that the ear coverts are a little darker and more 'solid', lacking the pale centre, while most importantly, the throat is both pure white with not even a hint of yellow and very sharply demarcated from the yellow underparts. In life this bird should give a harsh rasping call, unlike that of Blue-headed Wagtail, thereby confirming the identification.



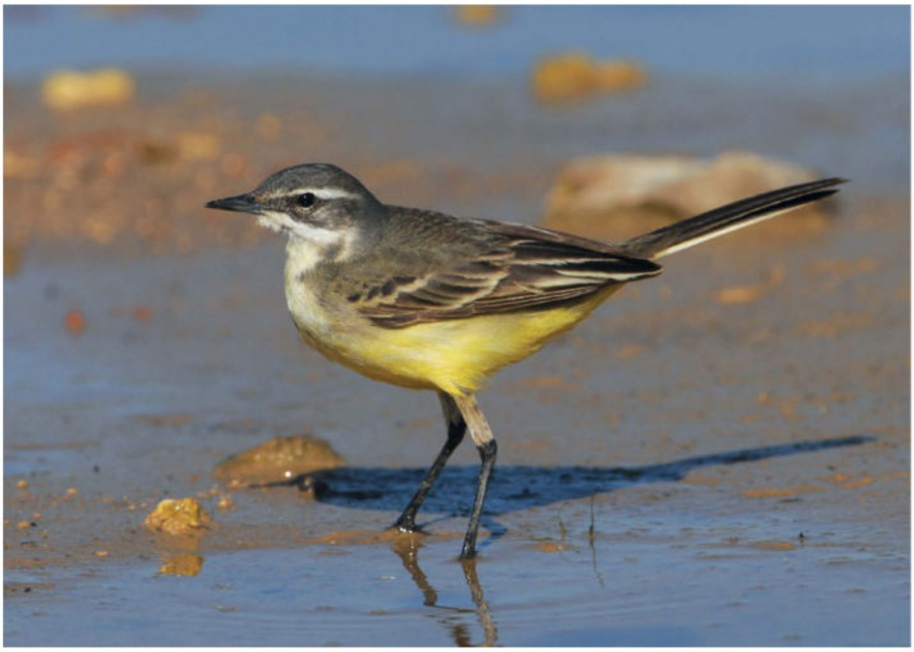
DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FOUR: Male Ashy-headed Wagtail (Tuscany, Italy, 30 March 2009). This bird lacks a strong supercilium and is therefore initially reminiscent of male Grey-headed Wagtail. Note, however, that most of the throat is bright white with only a little yellow on the lower throat. This makes it more likely to be an Ashy-headed Wagtail. The tiny, restricted pale mark behind the eye can be present on both Grey-headed and Ashy-headed Wagtails, so does not help with identification. If it was any stronger, however, it would be more suggestive of an intergrade. The yellow on the lower throat is perhaps a little extensive for a typical Ashy-headed Wagtail, so the identity of this bird would be best confirmed by considering the location (here Italy) and, most usefully, hearing a rasping call.



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

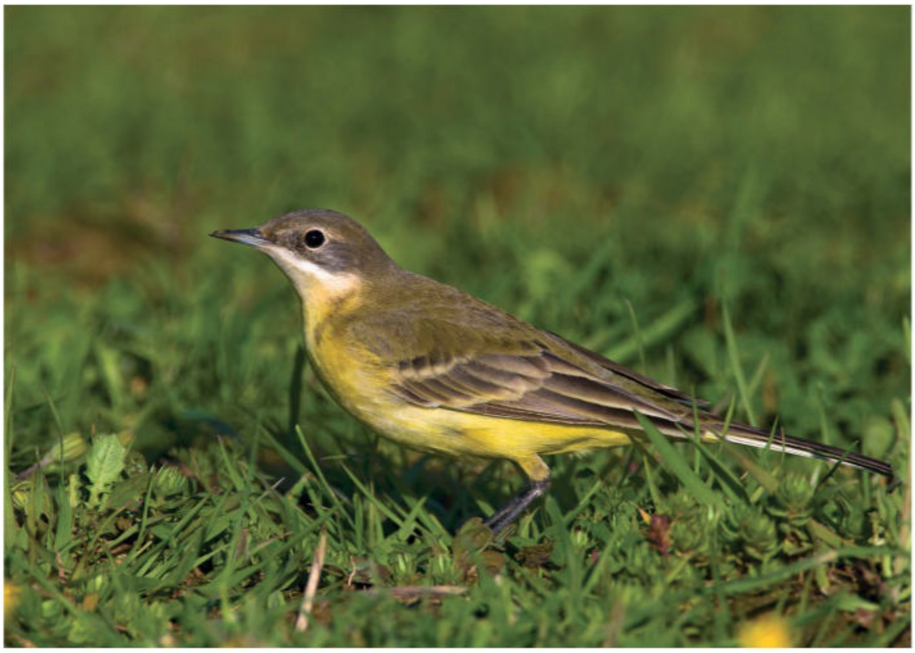
FIVE: Female Blue-headed Wagtail (Lesvos, Greece, 7 April 2006). Female Blue-headed Wagtails are essentially a muted version of the male, but are very difficult to separate from other Yellow Wagtail subspecies, including British Yellow and Spanish Wagtails. The appearance of this bird is typical, however, with soft blue-grey hues in the head, a prominent supercilium both before and behind the eye, pale-centred ear coverts and extensive pale yellow in the throat.



RAY TIPPER

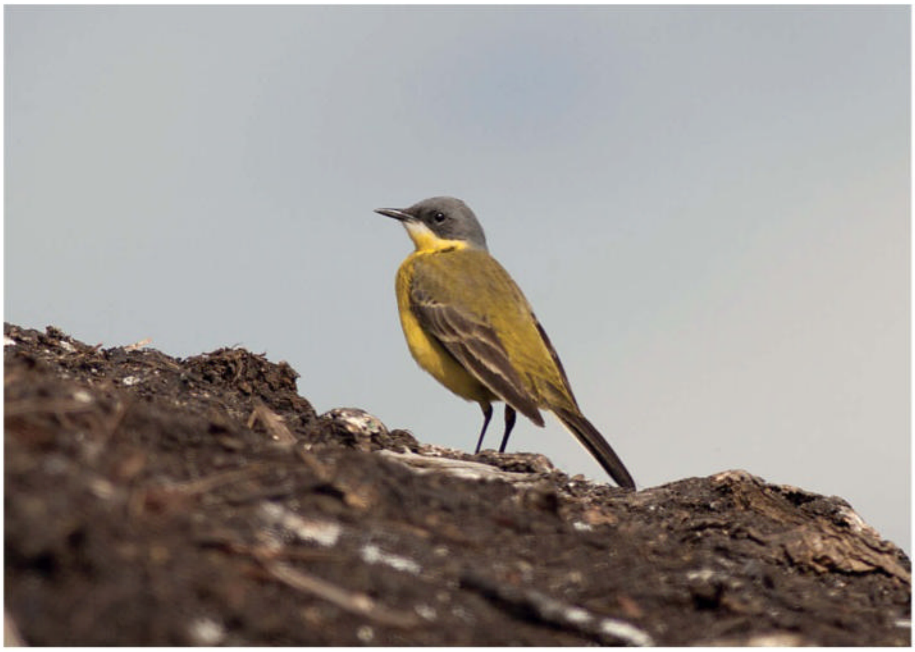
SIX: Female Spanish Wagtail (Tavira, Portugal, 5 April 2013). This female wagtail resembles the preceding bird, but its head is a little darker grey, the supercilium is very narrow, especially before the eye, and the throat is white. This combination of features belongs to Spanish Wagtail but, as always, the location – here, helpfully, Portugal – and the call would help to clinch it.

SEVEN: Female Ashy-headed Wagtail (Tuscany, Italy, 30 March 2009). This rather 'hooded' female would attract immediate attention in Britain. Its striking appearance, caused by the lack of a supercilium, resembles both Grey-headed and Ashy-headed Wagtails. The throat is largely white, perhaps suggesting Ashy-headed, although this can also be true of some, particularly first-year, Grey-headed Wagtails. We are therefore back to location (Italy again) and, crucially, the call. A harsh, rasping note would nail this bird as an Ashy-headed Wagtail.



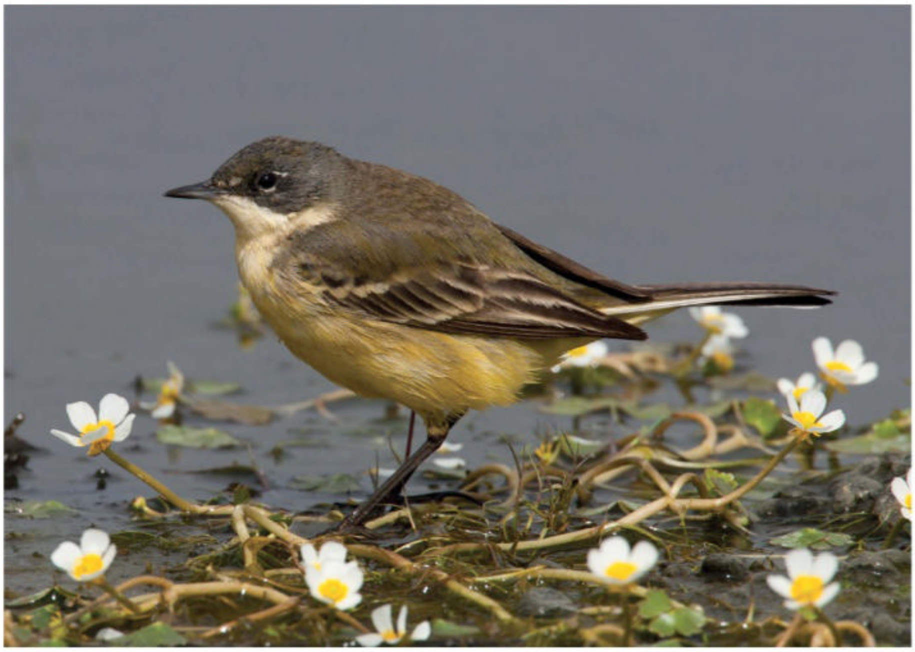
DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

EIGHT: Male Grey-headed Wagtail (Oulu, Finland, 21 May 2008). This grey-hooded male wagtail, completely lacking a supercilium, is striking indeed. The options can be narrowed down immediately to either Ashy-headed or Grey-headed Wagtails, and the extensively yellow throat establishes it as the latter. In life this bird would give a soft *sweeep* call identical to that of British Yellow and Blue-headed Wagtails. The Finnish location is of course also useful evidence.

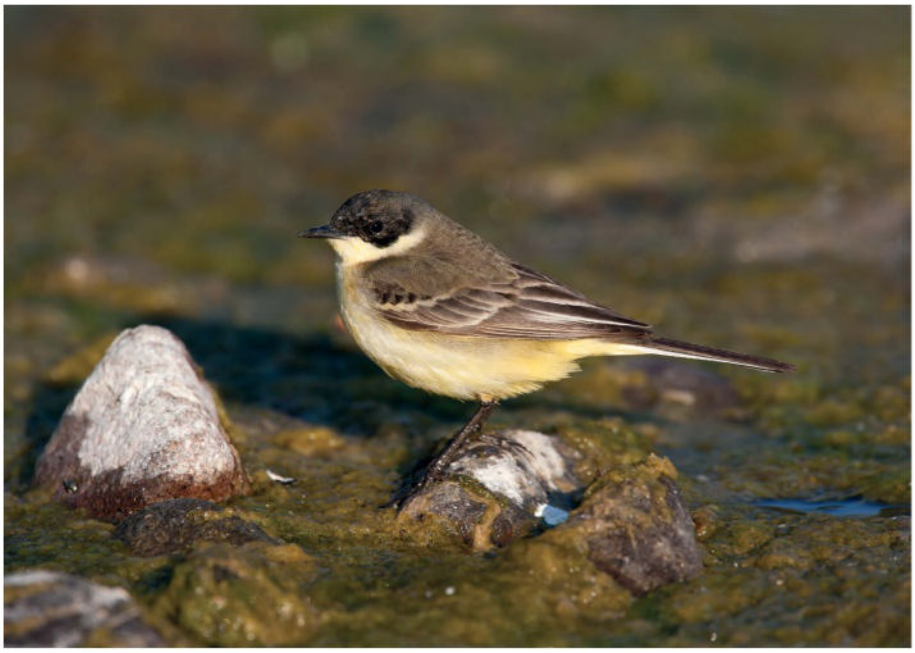


TONY MILLS (WWW.NOTJUSTBIRDS.COM)

NINE: Female Grey-headed Wagtail (Lesvos, Greece, 7 April 2006). This hooded wagtail is a little reminiscent of that in photo seven, although it has the same pale spot behind the eye as that in photo four. It is either an Ashy-headed or a Grey-headed Wagtail, and the white-looking throat might indicate the former. However, given that young Grey-headed Wagtails can also have white throats, we are not much further forward. Once again, we are back to location and call. The Greek location probably favours a migrant Grey-headed Wagtail, but to be totally confident we would need to hear it give a soft *sweeep* call.

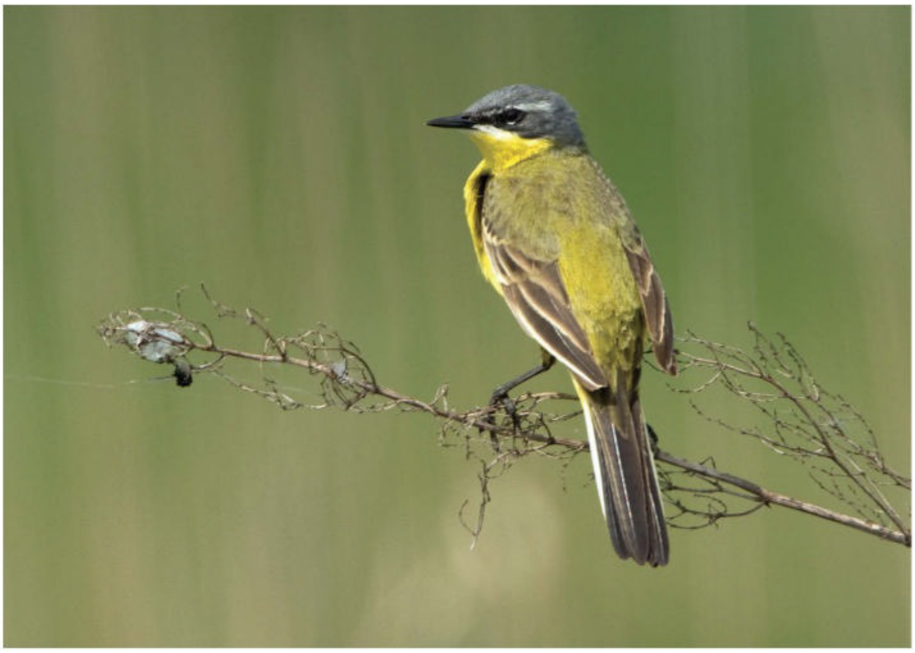


OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)



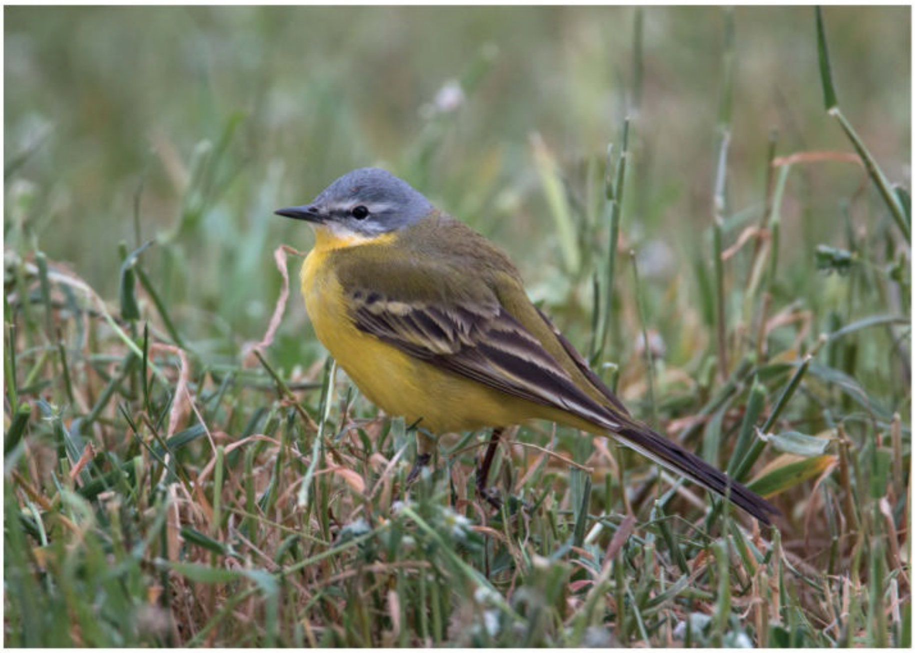
OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

TEN: Female Black-headed Wagtail (Lesvos, Greece, 28 April 2007). Despite the pale feather fringes in the crown and nape, this bird appears very black headed. A few male Ashy-headed and Grey-headed Wagtails can appear darker than normal, looking black at range, but this bird is a female. The very black-looking lores and ear coverts on such a bird are therefore enough to identify it as a Black-headed Wagtail. In life it would give a very harsh, rasping note which would at least eliminate Grey-headed Wagtail.



TONY COOMBS (WWW.WINGSANDTHINGSPHOTOGRAPHY.CO.UK)

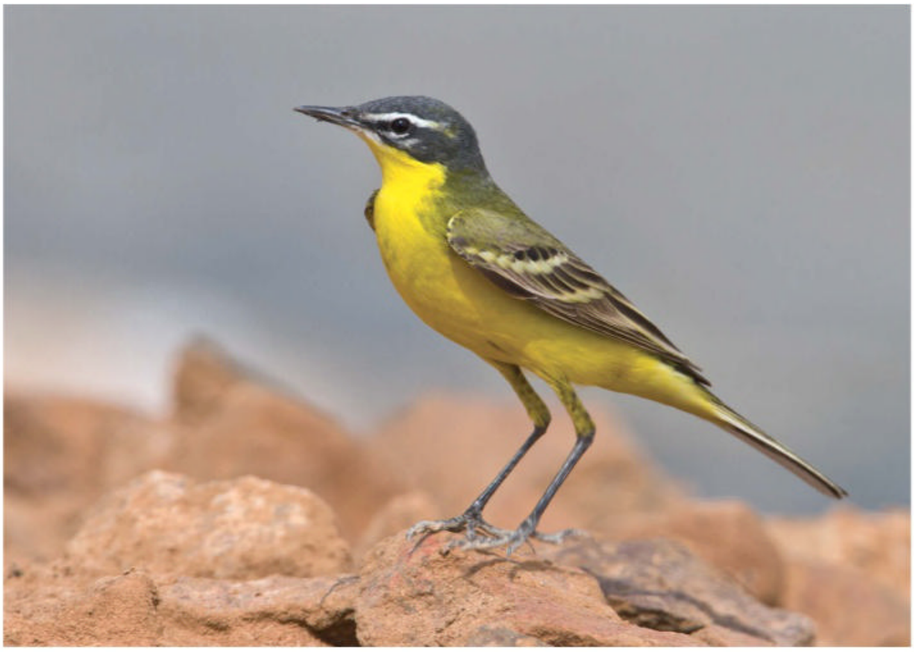
ELEVEN: Blue-headed x Grey-headed Wagtail (Briebiza Marshes, Poland, 9 April 2015). This bird shows a perplexing mixture of features. Although most resembling a male Blue-headed Wagtail, its supercilium is noticeably narrow before the eye and the lores and ear coverts look quite solidly dark. This combination of characters is incompatible with any Yellow Wagtail subspecies, so this bird must be an intergrade. Things get very difficult from now on, as assigning intergrades is even more fraught than identifying 'pure' birds, but this bird's Polish location suggests that a Blue-headed x Grey-headed Wagtail intergrade is most likely.



RAFAEL ARMADA (WWW.RAFAELARMADA.NET)

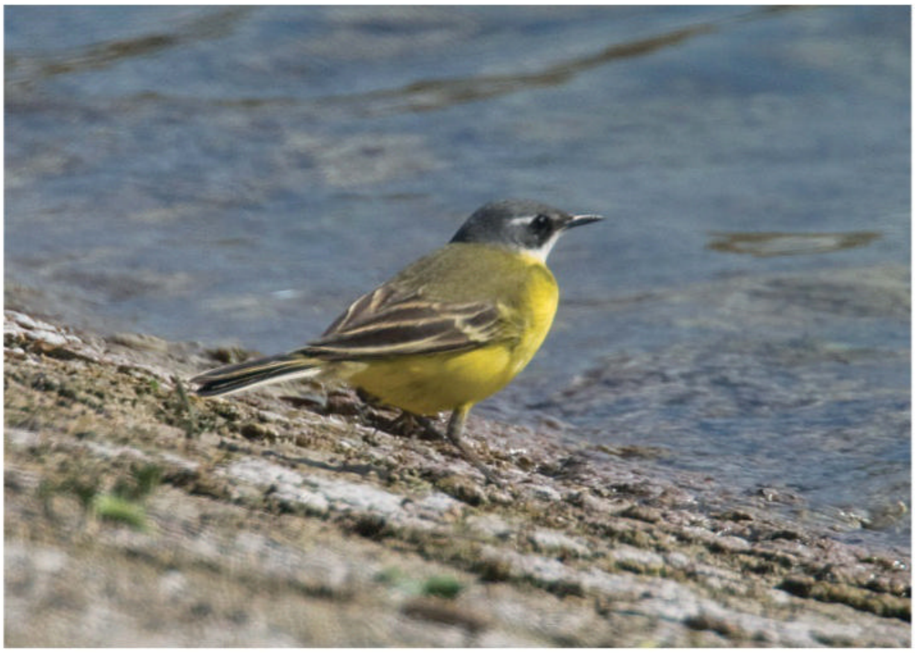
TWELVE: 'Channel Wagtail' *flava* x *flavissima* (Corsica, France, 18 April 2014). With its blue-grey head, prominent supercilium, pale-centred ear coverts and largely yellow throat, this bird might be logged as a male Blue-headed Wagtail. However, the head is not the typical mid blue-grey of that subspecies, appearing instead a strikingly pale lavender grey. This is wrong for Blue-headed Wagtail, but is typical of male Blue-headed x British Yellow Wagtail intergrades, known colloquially as 'Channel Wagtails'.

THIRTEEN: Male Black-headed x Blue-headed or Sykes's Wagtail (Eilat, Israel, 16 March 2006). Again, this is a perplexing bird. The very dark grey head and narrow supercilium might suggest Spanish Wagtail, but the throat is wholly yellow. It resembles both Blue-headed Wagtail and Sykes's Wagtail from Central Asia, but may be a little dark headed for either of these. If so, this might suggest an intergrade between a Black-headed Wagtail and either of these blue-headed subspecies. As ever, it may be better to leave some Yellow Wagtails unidentified.



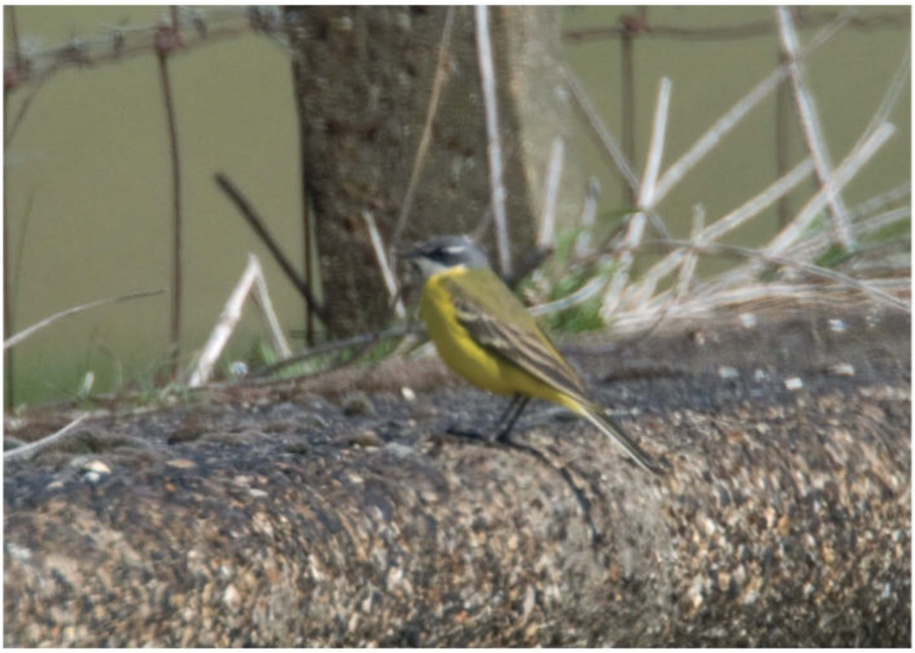
RAFAEL ARMADA (WWW.RAFAELARMADA.NET)

FOURTEEN: Putative Spanish Wagtail (King George V Res, Greater London, 20 April 2010). This British-photographed bird shows a narrow supercilium before the eye, quite dark 'solid' ear coverts and an apparently white throat. These features are highly suggestive of Spanish Wagtail. Spanish Wagtail reaches us occasionally and is now on the British list. Good notes on the call (and preferably sound recordings) are necessary for one to be accepted. This bird remained frustratingly silent.

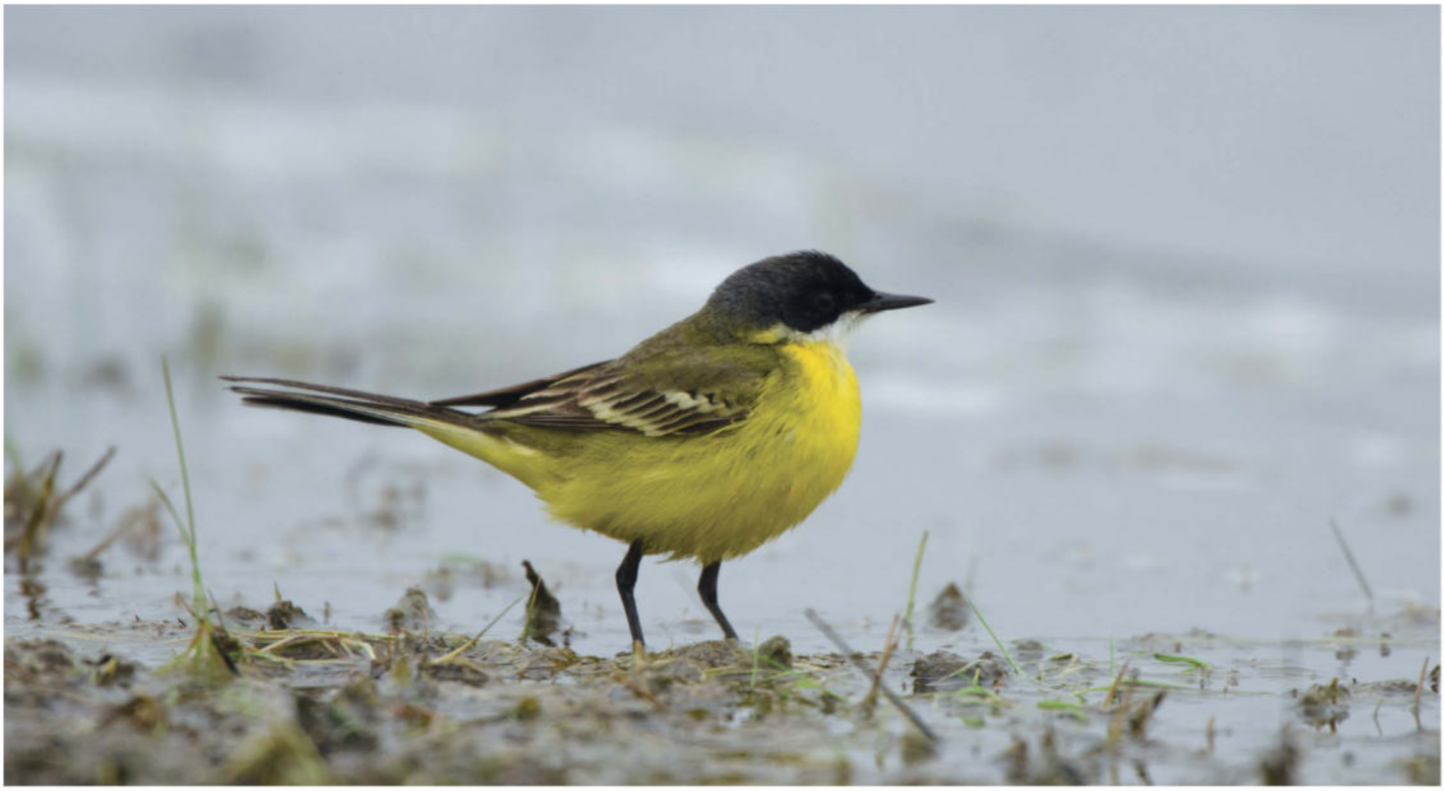


ROY WOODWARD

FIFTEEN: Putative Spanish Wagtail (King George V Res, Greater London, 20 April 2010). This is something of a 'record shot' of the same bird, but the combination of blue-grey head, narrow supercilium, 'solid' ear coverts and an apparently wholly white throat are still highly suggestive of Spanish Wagtail. As ever with 'out of context' potential vagrants such as this bird, the call is the key.



ROY WOODWARD


STEVE HATCH

SIXTEEN: Male Ashy-headed Wagtail (Northam Burrows CP, Devon, 21 April 2013). With its dark 'hooded' appearance and apparently all-white throat, this is certainly a striking bird and is highly suggestive of Ashy-headed Wagtail. It is, however, another 'out of context' bird photographed in Britain so its firm identification would have to rely on the call.

# Find your own wagtails

Yellow Wagtail is still a frequent migrant and breeder in Britain, despite a rapid decline in numbers over the last few decades. The British subspecies *flavissima* shows a propensity for coastal marshes and potato fields, and nests mainly in England, mostly in East Anglia, the Midlands and the North-West.

Relict populations are still present around the Severn Estuary, the Lleyn Peninsula, Cumbria and south-east Scotland. The species is largely absent from the West Country, Wales and elsewhere in Scotland, and occurs only as a scarce migrant on the east coast of Ireland.

Regarding the Continental subspecies, Blue-headed Wagtail is by far the most frequent, and is generally found among flocks of migrating Yellow Wagtails, though it can sometimes occur in its own small groups, too. The south and east coasts are by far the most likely places to log Blue-headed, particularly at well-known migration hot-spots such as the bird observatories.

Check ploughed fields, saltmarshes, horse paddocks, short grazed grassland and other areas where the soil is rich enough to hold good numbers of invertebrates or the turf short enough to support farm animals which disturb and attract the favoured insect food. However, the subspecies has been recorded almost anywhere Yellow Wagtails occur, and also makes use of the minor inland flyways such as the various river valleys, as well as among the sparser Yellow Wagtail occurrences as it progresses north on a fairly broad front.

Blue-headed also breeds on occasion within reach of the east coast, sometimes in pure pairs, but other times introgressing with *flavissima* to produce 'Channel Wagtails', which are generally seen in the overlap zones on either side of the English Channel. While Grey-headed Wagtail is a scarce but regular late spring migrant on the Northern Isles and less predictably along the east coast south to East Anglia, the chances of finding Ashy-headed and Iberian Wagtails are minimal as the tiny number (or even total lack) of records attest. Still, it's always worth checking mixed flocks of Yellow and/or Blue-headed Wagtails at coastal migration hot-spots. A spring male at these locations is by far the best bet for finding your own bird.

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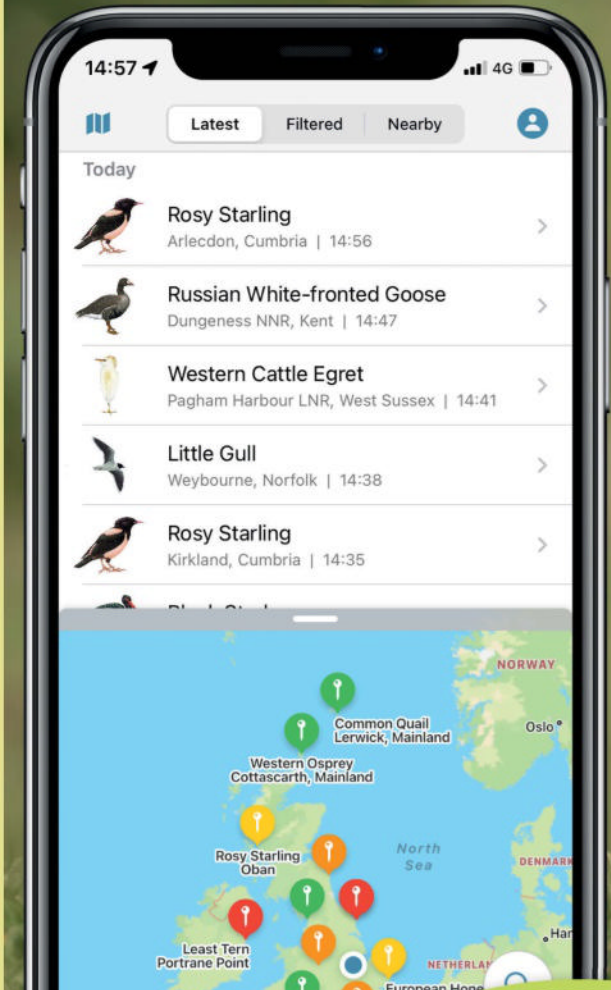

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Pagham Harbour LNR, West Sussex | 14:41

Little Gull
Weybourne, Norfolk | 14:38

Rosy Starling
Kirkland, Cumbria | 14:35

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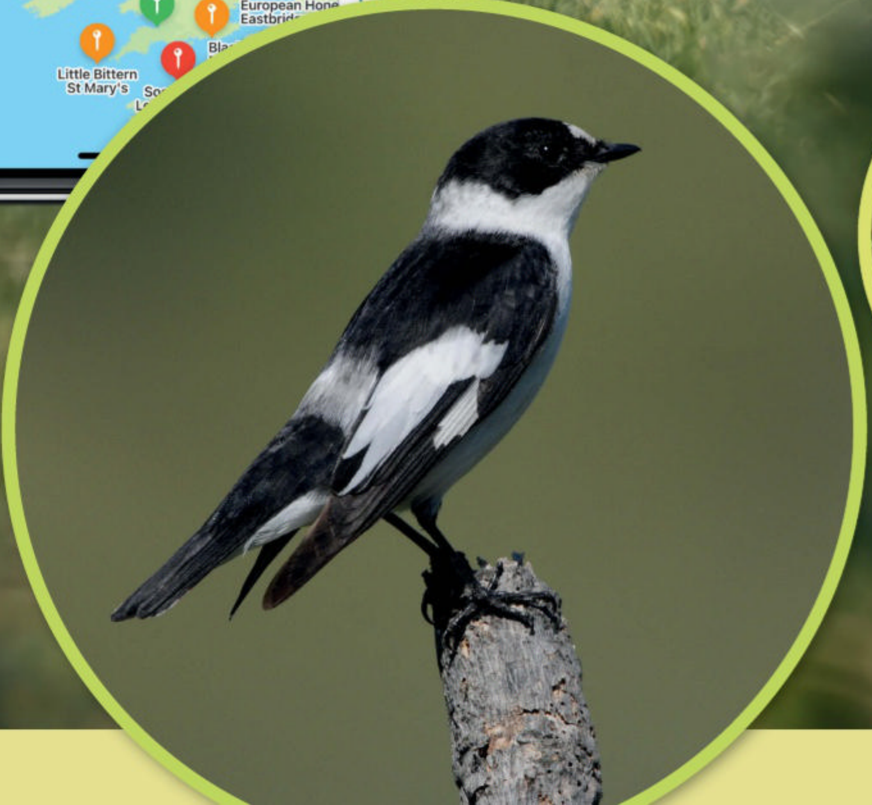

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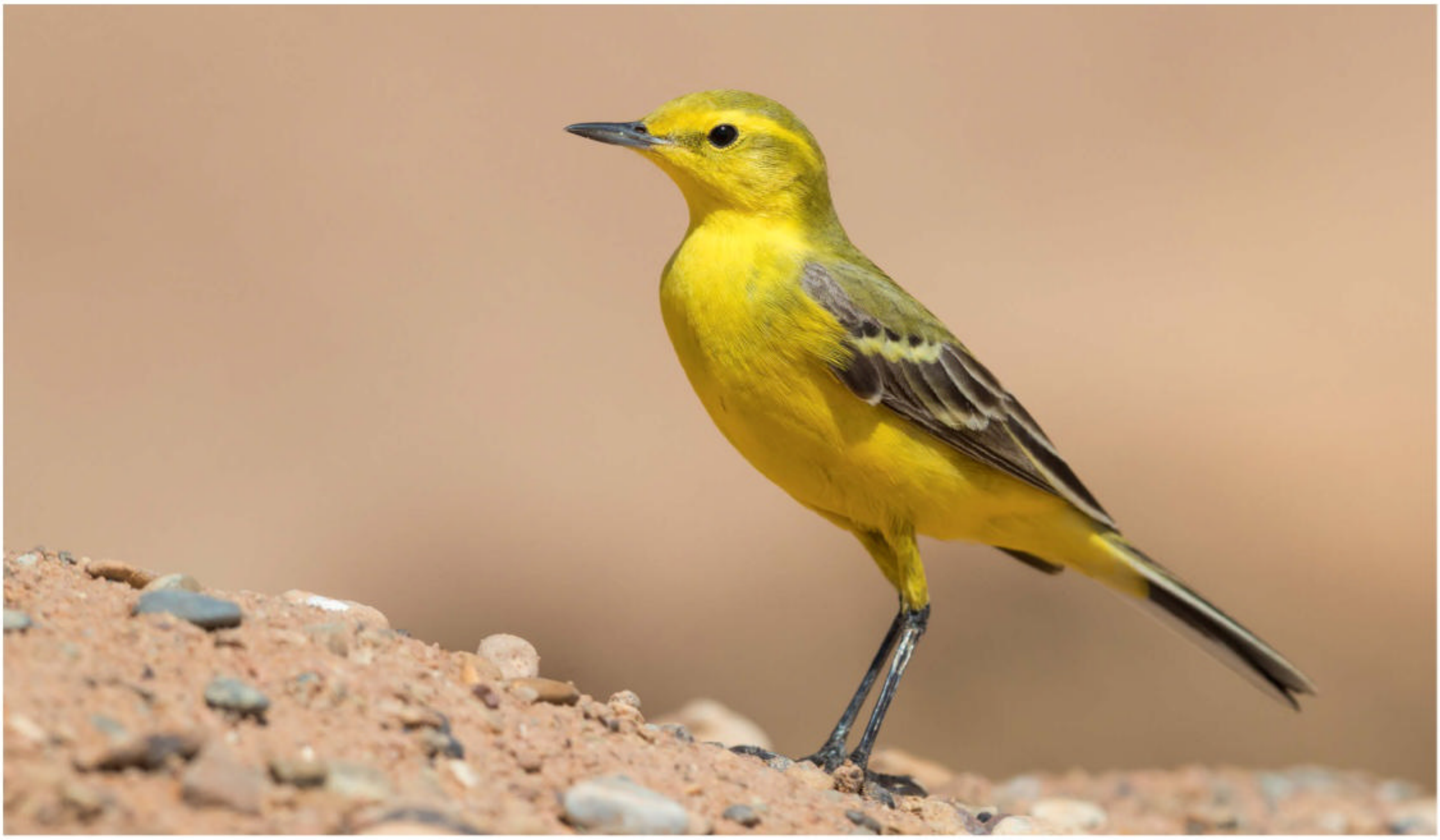
# Eastern and Western Yellow Wagtails

Words by Dominic Mitchell



SAVERIO GATTO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

ONE: Western Yellow Wagtail (Draâ-Tafilalet, Morocco, 29 April 2018). Male Western Yellow Wagtail of the subspecies *flavissima*, breeding in Britain, Ireland and the near-Continent, is the most strikingly yellow of all 'Yellow Wagtails' breeding in Europe. The bright canary-yellow of the underparts extends all the way up onto the forehead and through the supercilium, and on this bird even tints the wing-bars, with greener tones restricted to the eyestripe, crown, nape, mantle and scapulars. Only one other subspecies, *lutea* from Central Asia, is brighter yellow, but vagrants of that form have only wandered as far west as Cyprus and Ukraine.

Migration climaxes in May, with all of our summer visitors arriving back on territory, while migrants destined for more northerly continental breeding grounds are still very much on the move. There's also the welcome potential for scarce and rare stragglers from the south and east to be factored in. One species that encompasses all of these possibilities in a multitude of different guises is Western Yellow Wagtail, though the recently split and increasingly recorded Eastern Yellow Wagtail could add a further complication into the identification mix. Dominic Mitchell looks at the likely – and less likely – candidates.

# Basic Principles

The species that until recently was known simply as Yellow Wagtail has a remarkable breeding distribution, extending from north-west Africa and westernmost Europe across much of Eurasia to western and northern Alaska, and even into extreme north-west Canada. Unsurprisingly in such a vast range with so many habitats and differences in climate, various populations have evolved different plumages, vocal characteristics and habitat preferences.
Some of these distinctions have long been recognised at subspecies level, but more recent research into the genetics of the different forms has led to species-level division into Western and Eastern Yellow Wagtails, a view adopted by the IOC World Bird List and followed by the British Ornithologists' Union's Records Committee and the Irish Rare Birds Committee.
In contrast, however, Dutch taxonomic authorities divide western 'Yellow Wagtail' taxa into seven species, as follows: Yellow-crowned (monotypic *flavissima*), Blue-headed (nominate *flava* with subspecies *beema*, known as Sykes's), Grey-headed (monotypic *thunbergi*), White-throated (nominate *cinereocapilla*, with subspecies *iberiae*, Spanish, and *pygmaea*, Egyptian) and Black-headed (monotypic *feldegg*). While this alternative view has not been widely adopted, these wagtails are clearly some distance down the evolutionary road to becoming full species, even if interbreeding between some forms is more widespread than others.

Here we will consider the main European taxa and Eastern Yellow Wagtail, and focus chiefly on the all-important breeding plumages of males. Adults of both sexes of most Western Yellow Wagtail subspecies share rather similar greenish, greyish-green or greyish-brown upperparts, while males have well-saturated yellow underparts and females a more diluted, paler appearance. The key to visual identification is the head pattern of males, with females of some subspecies subtly distinctive but others indecipherable. Particularly in the case of potential vagrants, calls should also be listened to carefully – and ideally recorded for later analysis.

## Western Yellow Wagtail

The default 'Yellow Wagtail' in Britain is the distinctive *flavissima*, which arrives back from wintering grounds in sub-Saharan Africa in April. It is a less frequent sight than previously, its numbers having plummeted by 72 per cent between 1970 and 2010, and its range has also contracted markedly. Nonetheless it can still be found from south-east England and East Anglia westwards through central England to eastern Wales, and northwards principally through eastern England to south-east Scotland. Birds occur more widely on passage. It is a scarce migrant in Ireland, occasionally also breeding there.

Adult male *flavissima* is unmistakable when seen well. At range it can appear almost yellow headed, though closer inspection should reveal a variably yellow-green tone to the crown, nape and ear coverts. No other European 'Yellow Wagtail' looks so yellow from head to toe, though the even brighter Central Asian form *lutea*, known as Yellow-headed Wagtail (and outside the scope of this article), has occurred as a vagrant west to Cyprus and Ukraine. Females are duller with a greyer head, white throat and paler yellow underparts, much like female Blue-headed though sometimes with a yellow-tinged supercilium.

## Blue-headed Wagtail

Nominate *flava* is the most widespread form of Western Yellow Wagtail in continental Europe, breeding from France north to Germany and east to western Russia. Small numbers occur in Britain on migration, chiefly in the east, but it should be looked for anywhere. It is a vagrant to Ireland, and surprisingly has occurred on fewer occasions than southern overshoots such as Greater Short-toed Lark and Woodchat Shrike.

Breeding has taken place in Britain, principally in mixed *flava* x *flavissima* pairs, the offspring of which are known as Channel Wagtail, but pure pairs have also bred on occasion. There are three Irish breeding records.

Male Blue-headed Wagtail is distinctive with its blue-grey head, clean white supercilium and narrow white submoustachial stripe dividing the blue-grey 'cheek' – with small pale subocular patch – from the bright yellow underparts (though note that some first-summer males may show a white throat). Females are a much diluted version of the males, with a paler, subtler head colour, white supercilium, white throat and pale yellow underparts.

Hybrid male Channel Wagtails differ mostly in their lighter blue heads, a character which led to erroneous claims – and even acceptance – of Central Asian *beema* occurring in Britain. This taxon was removed from the British list in 2010.

## Spanish Wagtail

As its name suggests, the form *iberiae* breeds in Spain and Portugal, and also in north-west Africa. In theory it might be expected as a spring overshoot, but in practice – and despite a number of strong claims over the years – there are just two accepted British records, from Filey, North Yorks, on 22 April 2015 and St Agnes, Scilly, on 21-22 April 2018. There are no Irish records.
Spring male Spanish Wagtail has an ashy-grey head, often slightly darker than in Blue-headed Wagtail, with darker grey cheeks and lores, a contrasting and well-defined white throat, and white supercilium which in some is absent in front of the eye. Females also resemble female Blue-headed, but some with less distinct supercilia tend more towards female Grey-headed, and may not be safely identifiable in a vagrancy context.

## Ashy-headed Wagtail

The form *cinereocapilla* breeds in the north-west Balkans, Italy, southern France, Sicily and Sardinia, with a curiously disjunct population in south-west Morocco. In Britain there are six accepted records (and another four of *cinereocapilla* × *iberiae*), while Ireland has two breeding records, both from Co Down in 1956, and two of vagrants, in Co Antrim on 1 May 1985 and at two sites in Co Down on 9 and 10-11 May 1998.

Spring male Ashy-headed Wagtail closely resembles Spanish Wagtail, the chief distinction being that the supercilium is either just a small white stripe behind the eye or absent in many individuals.

In this respect the head pattern is not unlike Grey-headed, except for the white throat (though note that first-summer male *thunbergi* can show this). Females are also very like *iberiae*, but with a less distinct supercilium that averages slightly narrower.

## Grey-headed Wagtail

Replacing *flava* from Scandinavia eastwards into Siberia is *thunbergi*. It is most likely to occur in Britain during easterlies in May and early June, along North Sea coasts and especially in the Northern Isles. In average years about 15 are recorded in Scotland, but fall conditions can produce exceptional numbers: in May 1996 more than 260 were recorded, with peak counts of 52 at Loch of Spiggie and 25 on Fair Isle, both in Shetland. There are also at least five breeding records in Scotland.

Grey-headed Wagtail is scarcer in England, but there was an exceptional count of 25 at Happisburgh, Norfolk, on 15 May 1992. It is a major rarity in Ireland with just seven records.

Male Grey-headed Wagtail has a grey crown and nape and darker grey ear coverts, with no white markings whatsoever on the head. Some can appear almost black headed, creating confusion with Black-headed, so the exact tone and pattern need careful assessment. Females can closely resemble female *flava*, but many have shorter, less clear-cut supercilia and some may also have darker grey on the crown and cheeks.

## Black-headed Wagtail

In south-east Europe, the Middle East and parts of Central Asia the default breeding taxon is *feldegg*. Unsurprisingly given its range, it is a rare vagrant to Britain, with 21 records to 2018, and an extreme vagrant to Ireland with just one record, from Lough Foyle, Co Derry, on 24 April 2007.

Typical males are striking with glossy jet-black heads contrasting with more greenish mantles, while some (often named '*melanogrisea*' and occurring more commonly in the east of the range) show white on the throat sides and often also on the chin. Females are variable, but are often greyer above and whiter below than females of other subspecies, with darker heads. Although hybrids occur between various Western Yellow Wagtail taxa, the three most distinctive are those involving Black-headed Wagtail and neighbouring subspecies. They have even been given subspecific names, though none is now considered valid: '*superciliaris*' is black headed with a narrow white supercilium; '*xanthoprys*' is similar but with a yellow supercilium; and '*dombrowskii*' resembles *flava* but has blackish ear coverts and is slightly darker grey on the crown and nape.

The result of mixed breeding between *feldegg* and *flava* (perhaps also *cinereocapilla* and *beema*), and *lutea* in the case of '*xanthoprys*', these distinctive hybrids may well be familiar to birders visiting the Middle East in spring.

## Eastern Yellow Wagtail

This newly split species established itself on the British list on the basis of two old specimens, both supposedly involving '*simillima*' (now subsumed within the subspecies *tschutschensis*) from Fair Isle, Shetland, on 9 October 1909 and 25 September 2012. Recent genetic analysis revealed that the former was of eastern origin but could not be assigned to subspecies, while the latter was in fact a Western Yellow Wagtail.

It was 101 years before the next record, a long-staying bird in Devon from 4-19 December 2010, and there have now been 10 accepted British records, all in late autumn and early winter. There is one Irish record, from Tory Island, Co Donegal, from 12-28 October 2013, this individual being confirmed by DNA as either *plexa* or *tschutschensis*.

However, 11 confirmed occurrences in 111 years are clearly not representative of Eastern Yellow Wagtail's true status: with improving knowledge of its field characters and call, and reports increasing each year, this species should prove to be less of an extreme rarity than the statistics indicate.

There is currently just a single spring record from Britain (on Scilly in April 2019), but the number of winter records in recent years suggests the species should be on our radar. There are four subspecies of Eastern Yellow Wagtail grouped into two clades, of which *tschutschensis* in the northern clade seems the most likely vagrant.

In males of this subspecies the forehead, crown and nape are grey and the supercilium is white, with ear coverts ranging from pale grey to almost black. Some are very like Blue-headed Wagtail but usually lack the pale subocular mark on the ear coverts. Females also resemble *flava* but often have darker grey ear coverts. A more in-depth look at the various subspecies of Eastern Yellow Wagtail will appear in a forthcoming issue.

## Voice

To my ears the typical call of *flavissima* Western Yellow Wagtail is a distinctive, high-pitched *tseep*, transcribed by some authors as *pslie* or *psit*, among other variations. *Flava* and *thunbergi* have identical calls, whereas *iberiae*, *cinereocapilla* and *feldegg* utter a harsher or buzzing note with a distinct 'r' sound, recalling Citrine Wagtail. However, these three taxa can also give *flava*-like calls, hence the importance of trying to record the voice of any potential vagrant.

Eastern Yellow Wagtail also has a sharp, harsh call even more like Citrine, as many who heard the Norfolk bird in winter 2019-20 will recollect – indeed such calls are, as in that instance, often the best way of detecting the presence of a rare 'Yellow Wagtail' in Britain and Ireland in the first place.

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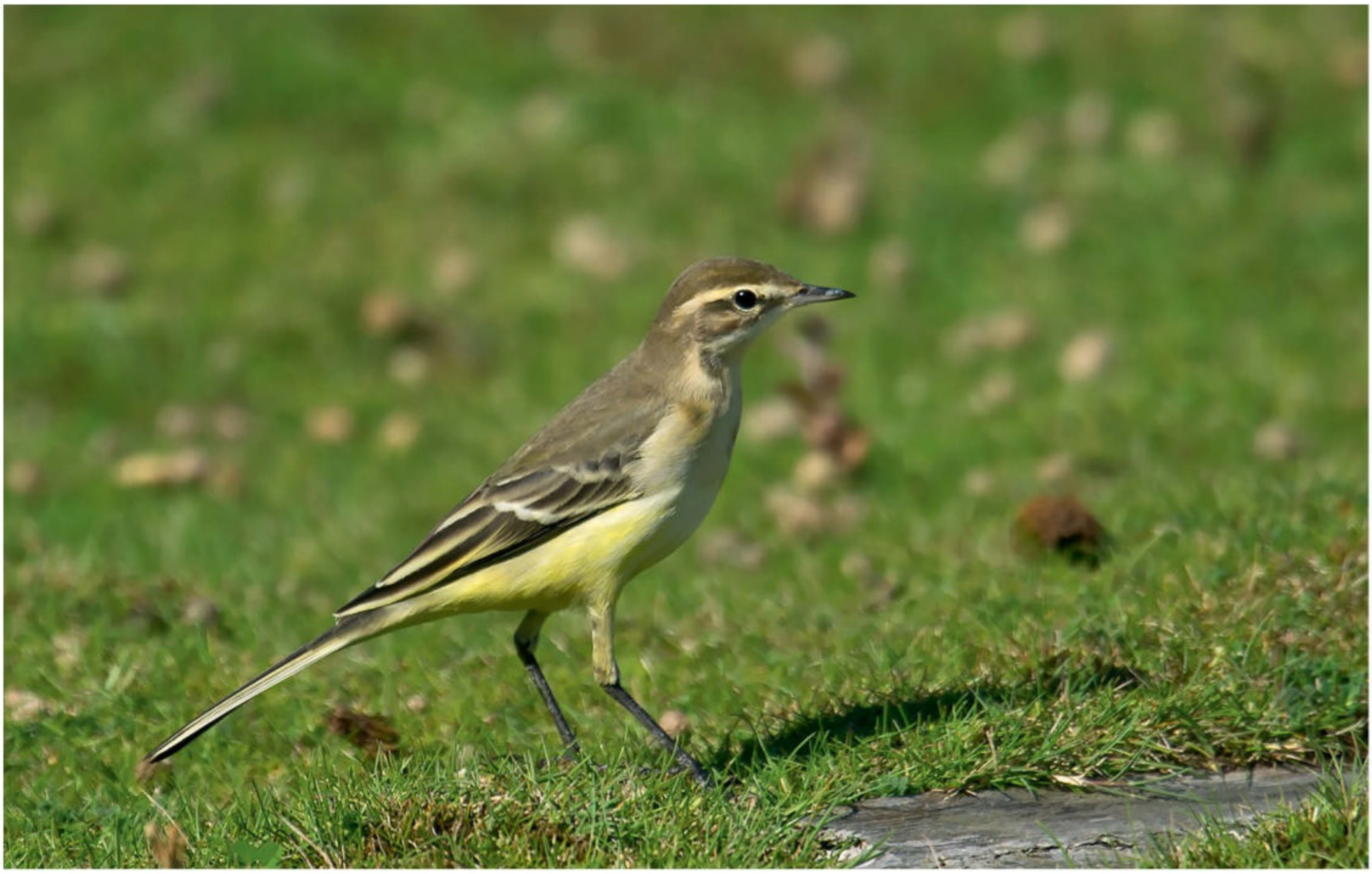
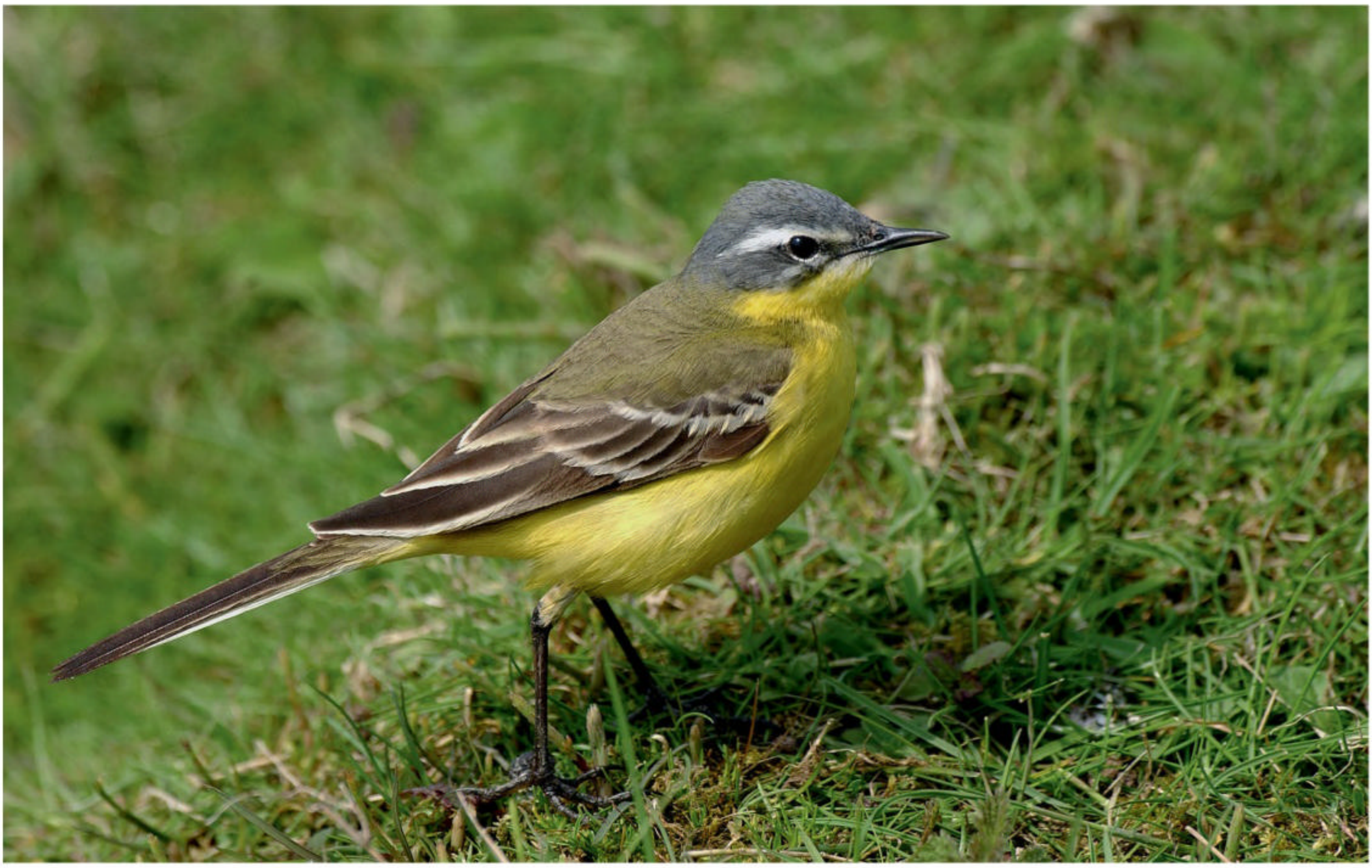


STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

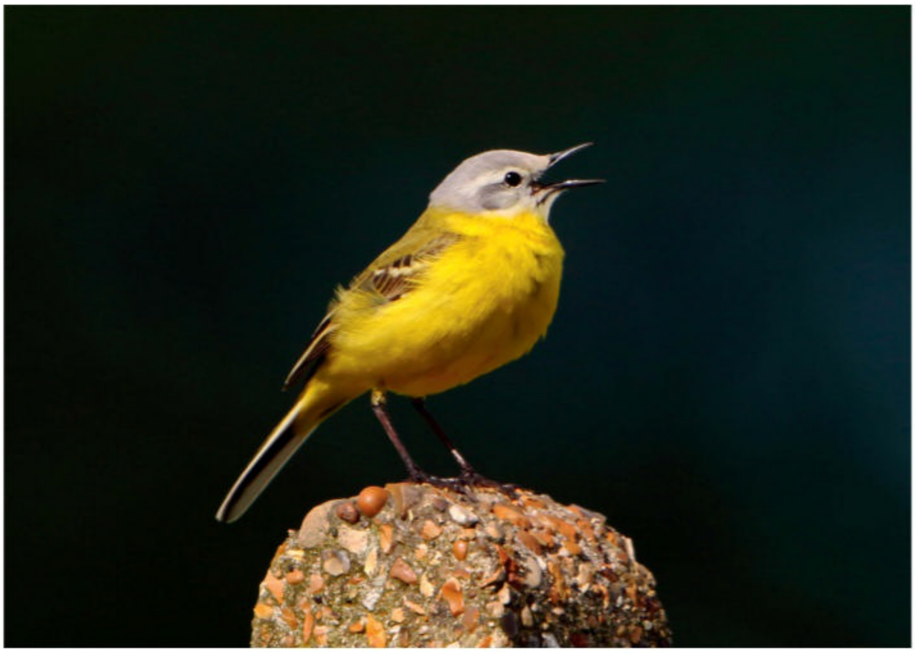
TWO: Western Yellow Wagtail (Seaforth NR, Lancashire, 25 August 2011). Females of many Western Yellow Wagtail taxa, especially those occurring in western Europe, are similar in appearance, and some are impossible to assign to subspecies other than by location. This late summer female in north-west England is clearly most likely to be *flavissima* on range alone, though flava is very similar in appearance; however, the yellow in the supercilium of this individual is also a good indicator of female *flavissima*.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

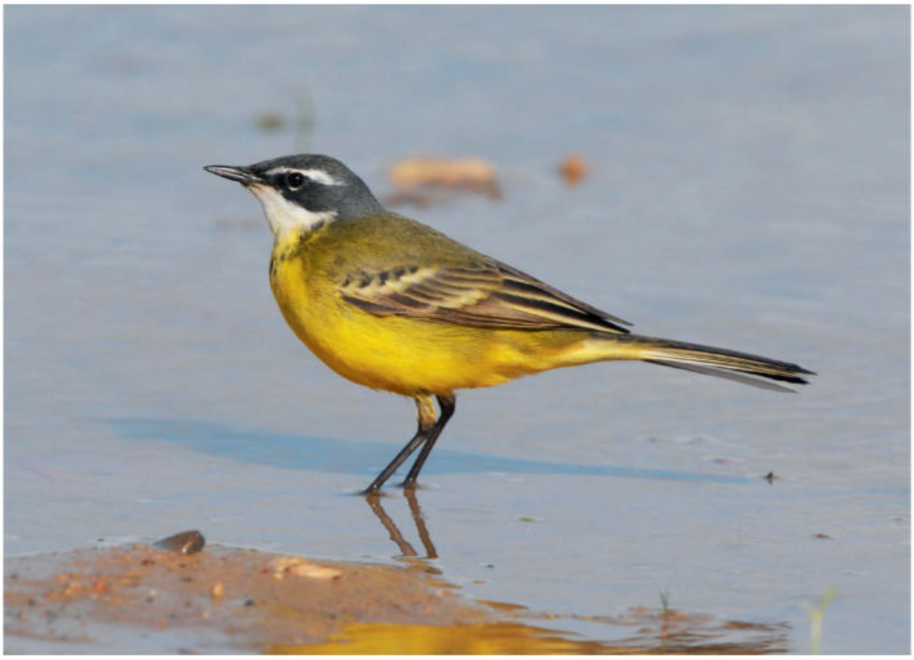
THREE: Blue-headed Wagtail (Seaforth NR, Lancashire, 1 May 2004). After *flavissima*, the most likely 'Yellow Wagtail' to reach Britain is nominate *flava*, Blue-headed, and birds like this colourful spring male stand out readily in a flock of migrant wagtails in spring. Note the blue-grey forehead, crown, nape and ear coverts, the white supercilium flaring behind the eye, and the small white subocular mark on the ear coverts. There is also a poorly developed narrow white submoustachial stripe dividing the blue-grey 'cheek' from the bright yellow throat.

FOUR: Channel Wagtail (Noneley, Shropshire, 25 April 2019). Mixed pairings of Yellow and Blue-headed Wagtails in Britain, Ireland and the near-Continent, including from an intergrade zone in northern France, produce offspring known colloquially as Channel Wagtail. Spring males generally resemble Blue-headed Wagtail, but are paler, almost powder-blue, on the forehead, crown, nape and ear coverts. They can also show more white in the supercilium, ear coverts and throat, and are thought to have been responsible for erroneous – and now rejected – British claims of Sykes's Wagtail from Central Asia.



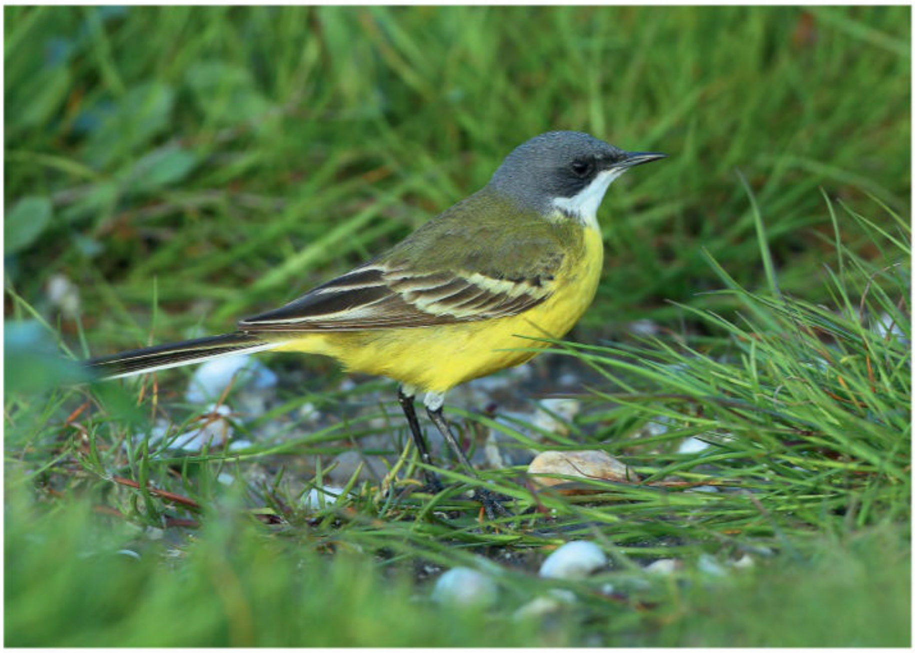
JIM ALMOND (WWW.SHROPSHIREBIRDER.CO.UK)

FIVE: Spanish Wagtail (Faro, Portugal 28 March 2013). Spanish Wagtail shares many characters with Ashy-headed, with which it is known to intergrade. This spring male was photographed in southern Portugal, in the core breeding range of *iberiae*, and exhibits the classic ashy-grey head, dark grey cheeks and lores, a contrasting and well-defined white throat, and strong white supercilium, which when combined add up to a confident identification.



RAY TIPPER

SIX: Ashy-headed Wagtail or intergrade (Var, France, 5 April 2013). This smart male wagtail exhibits the fundamental characters of Ashy-headed, with a grey forehead, crown and nape, darker grey ear coverts and lores, and a well-delineated white throat. There may just be a catch, however, as there is a hint of pale feathering in front of the eye – those male Ashy-headeds that do have a suggestion of a supercilium (many don't) should show it behind or above the eye rather than in front. This bird was also photographed on the Mediterranean coast of France, which is a known intergrade zone between *iberiae* and *cinereocapilla*.



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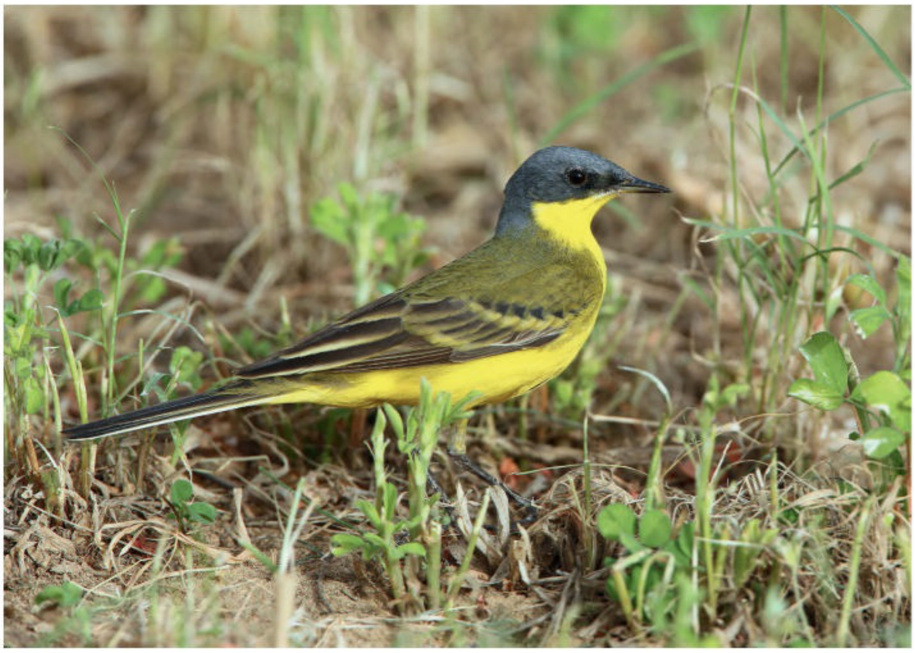
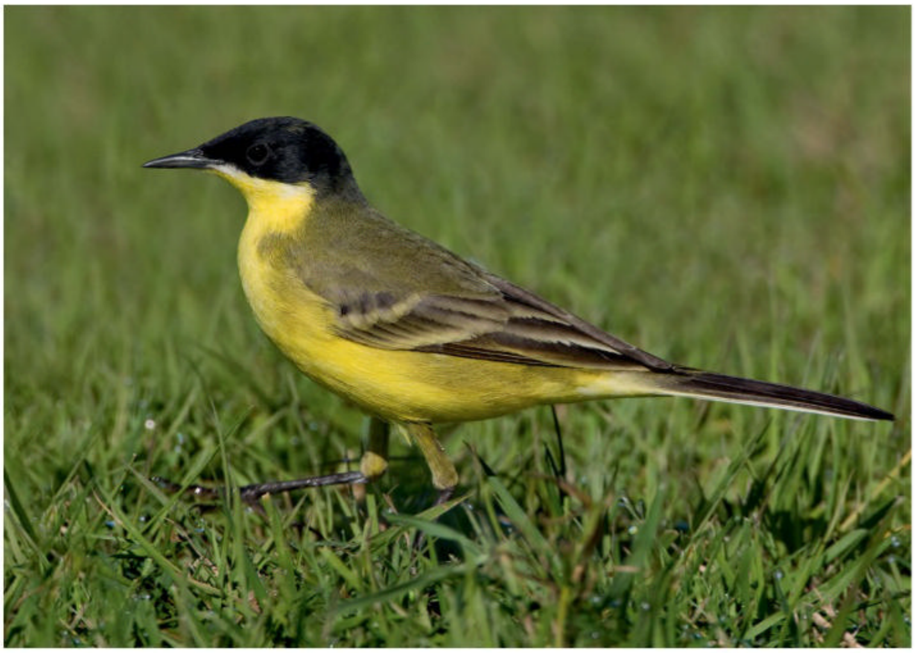


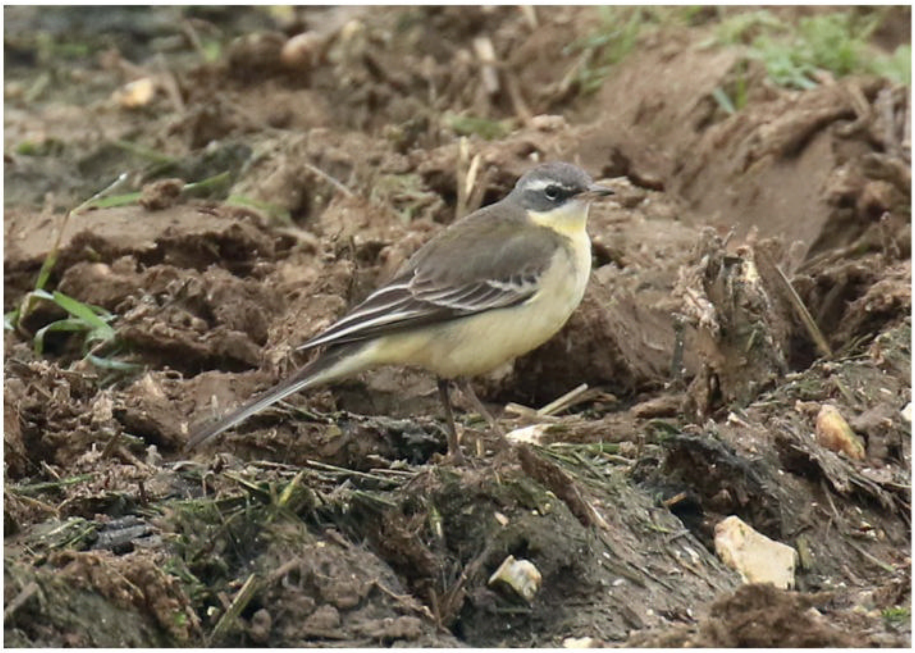
AURELIEN AUDEVARD

SEVEN: Grey-headed Wagtail (Al Abraq, Kuwait, 22 April 2015). Classic male *thunbergi* in spring has a grey head with slightly darker ear coverts and no white supercilium (though a few may have a faint line behind the eye); this bird has unmarked yellow underparts, but some show a 'necklace' of dark spots. In a few males the crown and nape can appear more or less black, inviting confusion with Black-headed Wagtail, and on such birds the exact colour needs careful assessment. Call is another clue – in Grey-headed it is similar to *flavissima*, while in *feldegg* it is more buzzing and Citrine-like.



DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

EIGHT: Black-headed Wagtail (Tuscany, Italy, 3 April 2008). With its completely black head and bright yellow underparts, male *feldegg* is surely the most striking of all Western Yellow Wagtail forms. The lores, crown, nape and ear coverts should be unmarked glossy black; some, like this bird, show white on the throat sides and often also on the chin, and are named *'melanogrisea'*. Males showing white or yellow supercilia or a greyer tone to the crown or nape are hybrids with other forms, and are often known by the invalid trinomials *'superciliaris'*, *'xanthoprys'* and *'dombrowskii'* respectively.

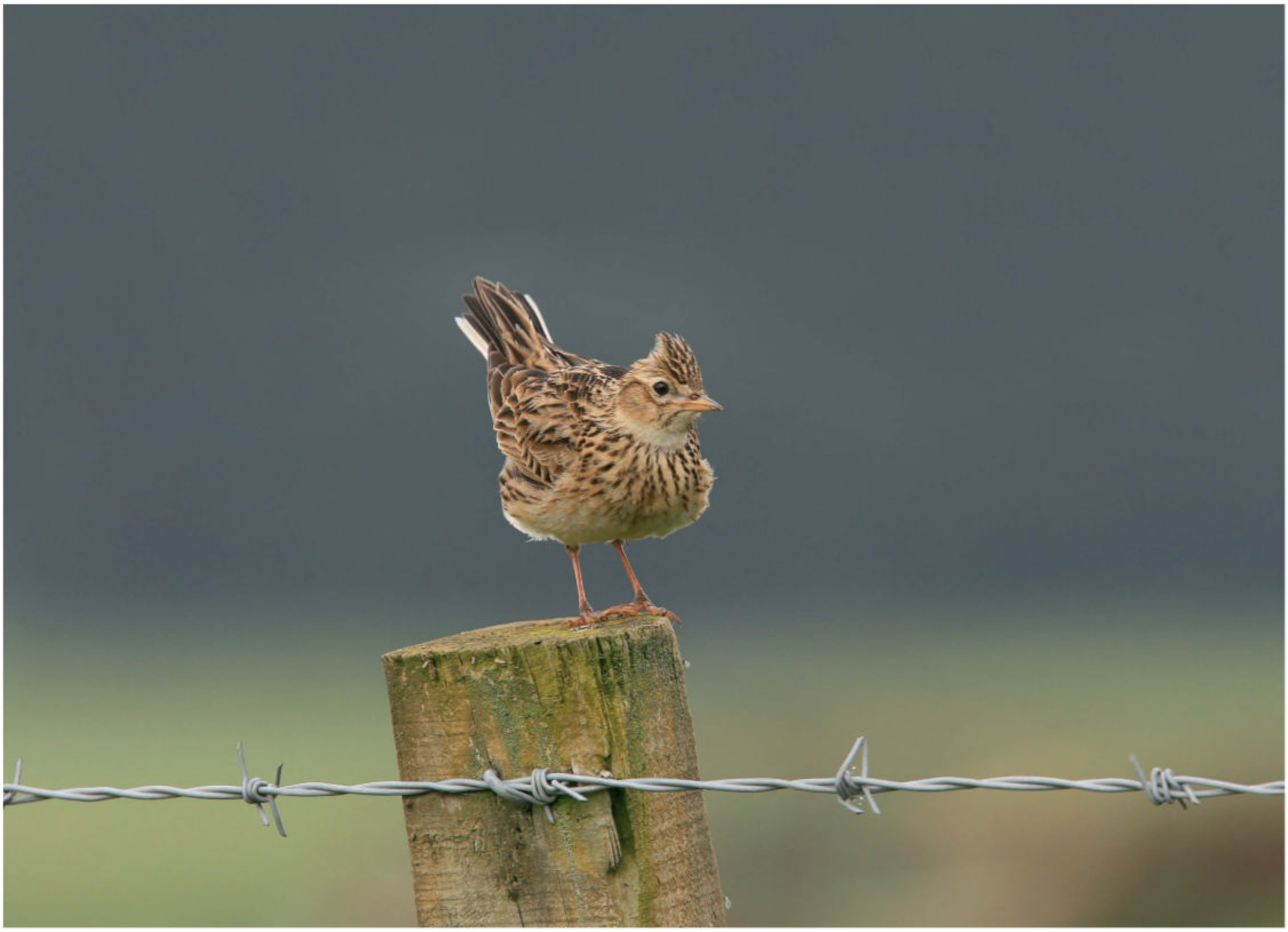


DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

NINE: Eastern Yellow Wagtail (Sedgeford, Norfolk, 22 January 2020). Many of the first-winter Eastern Yellow Wagtails that have reached western Europe are distinctively grey and white, but this recent wintering male in Norfolk – considered by many to be of the subspecies *tschutschensis* – gives a much better impression of what a spring male should look like. Its appearance recalls a dull Blue-headed Wagtail, but the head is greyer and slightly darker, especially on the lores, and there is no pale subocular mark on the ear coverts.

# Eurasian Skylark, Woodlark and Greater Short-toed Lark

Words by Keith Vinicombe



STUART ELSOM LRPS (WWW.STUARTELSOM.CO.UK)

ONE: Eurasian Skylark (Cheviot Hills, Northumberland, 16 June 2007). The familiar skylark should be the yardstick for all lark identification. It is a rather large, broad-beamed lark, but quite nondescript, with a short but noticeable crest and a thickish, pointed bill. A mostly plain face shows only a faint dark stripe behind the eye and a slight but noticeable supercilium; but note the dark semi-circular 'sub-ocular line' immediately below the eye, a characteristic of many larks. Its upperparts are well streaked, and note also the finely streaked breast band.

A bugbear of all beginner birders is the prevalence of small brown streaky passerines, and the similarities of many species groups remain in the forefront of the minds of the more experienced, too. Perhaps the most typical are our two commonest larks, Eurasian Skylark and Woodlark, and the very scarce Greater Short-toed Lark, in which ID difficulties are apparent in all ages. Keith Vinicombe casts his analytical eye over the key features and pitfalls of this tricky trio.

# Basic Principles

There are 10 species of lark on the British list, but only four occur here regularly. With its yellow and black head pattern, Shore Lark is distinctive in its own right, but the other three are all brown and streaky. Of these, by far the commonest and most familiar is Eurasian Skylark. It is a bird of open ground, particularly associated with arable farmland, but it can be found breeding throughout most of rural Britain and Ireland.

There is no doubt that, in historical times, Eurasian Skylark increased considerably with the spread of agriculture. In recent years, however, numbers have once again declined, an inevitable result of agricultural intensification.

Although considered a resident, there is a general autumn retreat from high ground and some southward withdrawal, when large flocks often gather in suitable fields or are seen overhead. In addition, cold weather movements are a characteristic of the species in heavy winter snowfall.

### Woodlark

Woodlark is a temperate and Mediterranean species which shuns both severe cold and wet and windy climates, its range being largely confined by the 17°C and 31°C July isotherms (Cramp 1998).

In Britain, it is right at the north-western limit of its range and survives here by being a habitat specialist, breeding locally in forest clearings and heathland. The species' numbers and range fluctuate with the vagaries of the climate, and it is currently enjoying something of an up-turn. A survey in 2006 revealed the surprisingly high total of 3,064 territories, although it remains to be seen whether it has declined during the recent run of hard winters.

The species is concentrated in East Anglia, the Home Counties, Sussex and Hampshire, with significant populations also found in Dorset and Devon and as far north as Nottinghamshire, Staffordshire and Yorkshire (Holling *et al* 2011).

Some sites are deserted in winter, when small flocks may appear on nearby stubble fields, often with Eurasian Skylarks. A few are seen at south and east coast migration sites in April-May and, more especially, in October-November. However, birds seen away from regular areas should be identified with caution, particularly fly-overs on migration, and such records are often met with a certain degree of scepticism.

### Greater Short-toed Lark

This species breeds on steppe grasslands and semi-desert zones across southern Europe and North Africa, eastwards into central China, its northern range being limited by the 20°C July isotherm.

It spread in Europe with the expansion of low-density farming but, inevitably, recent agricultural intensification has provoked population declines and range contractions (Hagemeijer and Blair 1997). It is a regular but very scarce visitor to Britain, and was dropped from the rarities list as long ago as 1993. Fraser and Rogers (2006) analysed national trends up to 2003, by which time the British total had reached 706 records.

Numbers were generally high between 1991 and 2000, with an all-time peak of 45 in 1996, but there appears to have been a steady decline here since 2000, no doubt related to the aforementioned population declines.

Records occur mainly from late April to June, with a peak in May, and again from September to early November, with a peak in early October. There have even been a few in winter. Autumn records have outnumbered those in spring, but it is autumn birds that have declined most dramatically.

A peculiar feature of its occurrence patterns is that it is very much a bird of islands. During the period 1958-85, Shetland and Scilly accounted for the lion's share of records. Shetland had 45 per cent of spring birds and 34 per cent of autumn, whereas Scilly had 14 per cent of those in spring and 36 per cent of those in autumn (Dymond, Fraser and Gantlett 1989). Unfortunately, there has so far been no further analysis of the records since 2006.

Most autumn vagrants are first-winters, but they may retain some scalloped, dark-centred juvenile scapulars. The species shows considerable geographical variation and British records fall into two broad categories: sandy-coloured individuals, presumed to be from southern and western parts of the range, and greyer birds suspected to be of more eastern origin, such as the Central Asian subspecies *longipennis*. The former category seems to account for many spring records, while the latter appear to occur mainly in autumn (Fraser and Rogers 2004).

In my experience of 17 in Britain, most have in fact been quite consistent in their rather sandy appearance. Interestingly, Kehoe (2006) stated that, although southern and eastern birds are assumed to occur, subspecific identification beyond the breeding range is fraught with difficulty. Consequently, records here are regarded as being of indeterminate form.

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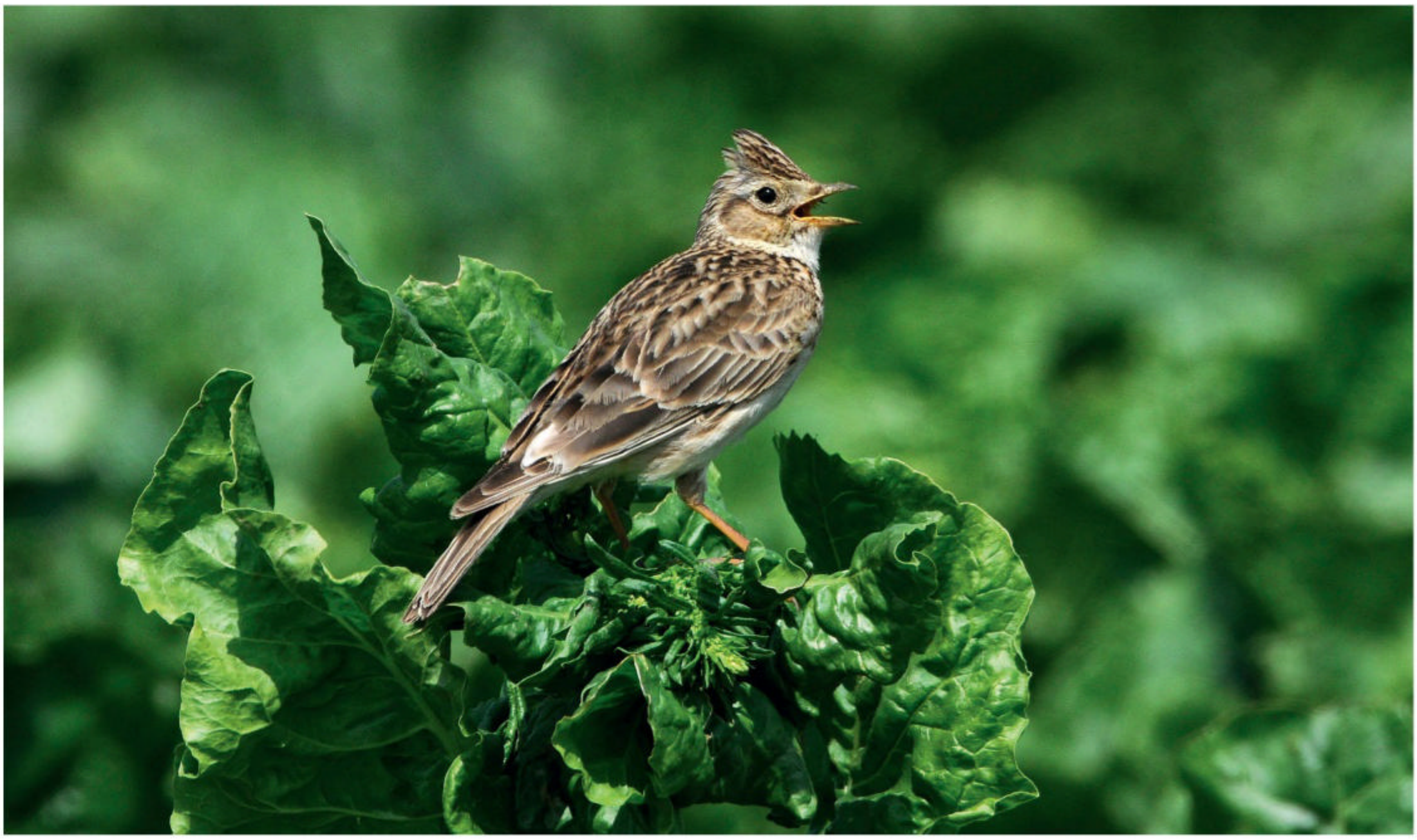
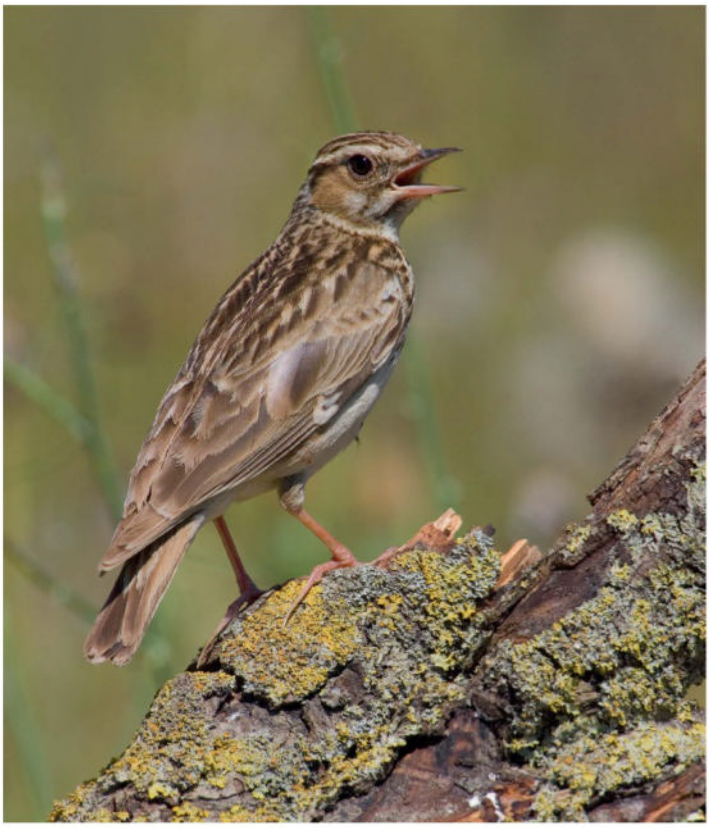
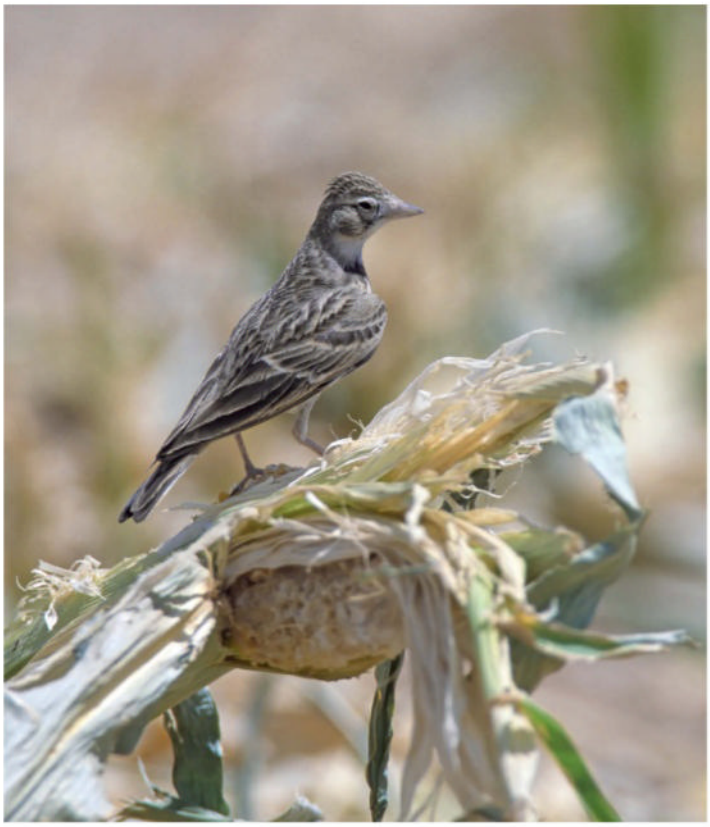

RICHARD BROOKS (WWW.RICHARD-BROOKS.CO.UK)

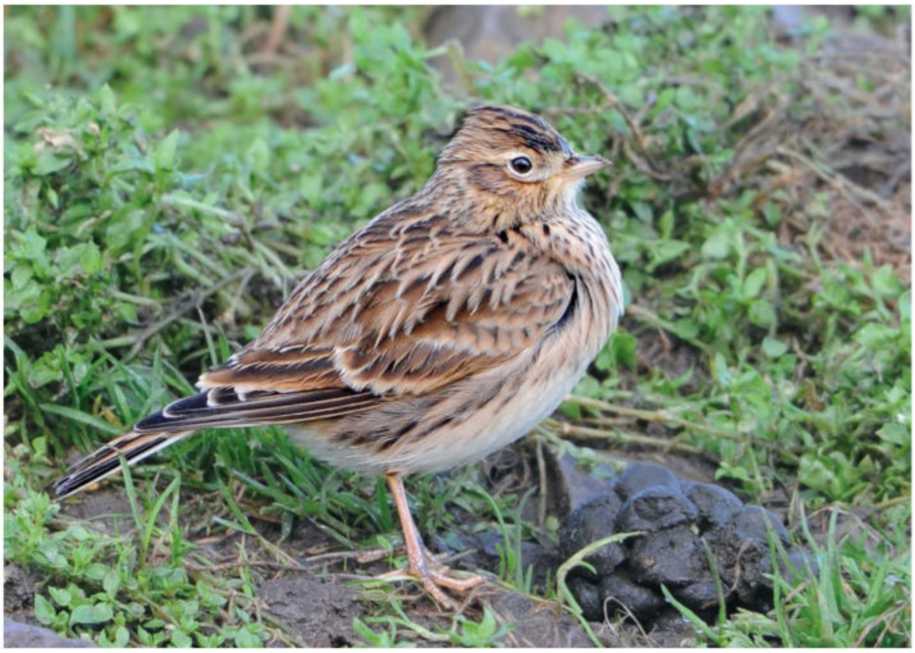
TWO: Eurasian Skylark (Snoring, Norfolk, 25 June 2010). This species is famous for its song, an evocative sound of summer farmland. Not surprisingly, it has been immortalised in poetry and music, with *The Lark Ascending* by Ralph Vaughan Williams being the most popular choice of music on BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs. Although, as in this photograph, it may sing from the ground or a perch, it usually does so from a stationary position high in the sky. The familiar song is a continuous thin, musical refrain, often containing strongly mimetic phrases.


DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

THREE: Woodlark (Tuscany, Italy, 28 May 2006). Unlike Eurasian Skylark, Woodlark readily perches in trees, but it too mostly feeds on the ground. The facial pattern is stronger than skylark's, with a more noticeable dark stripe behind the eye and a variable dark brown rear border to the rather richly coloured orangey-brown ear coverts. As this photograph shows, a distinctive feature is the thick buffy-white tips to the noticeably black primary coverts. These form a distinctive black-and-buff patch on the edge of the closed wing. Note also the shortish tail.

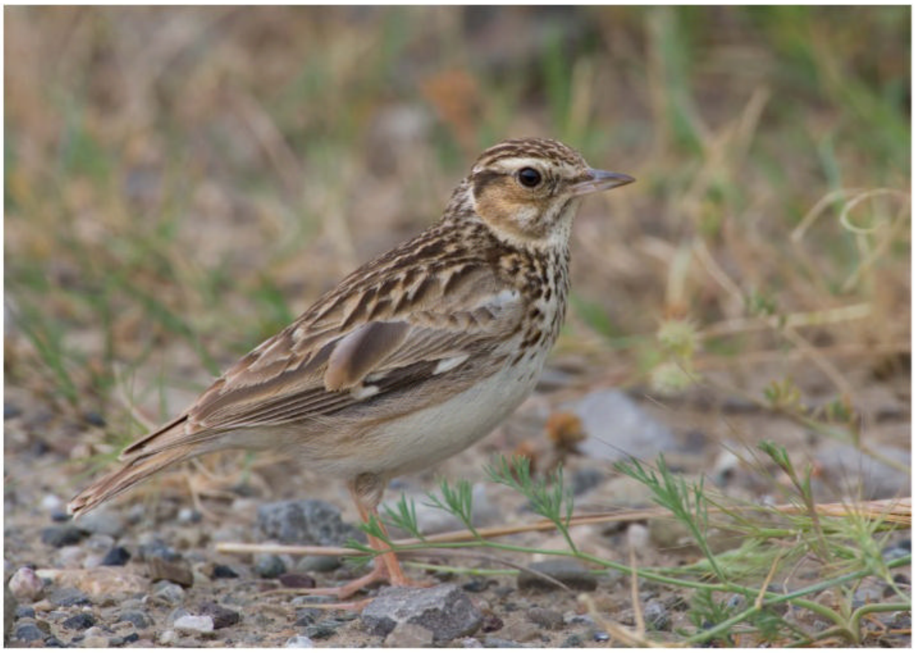

TOMI MUUKKONEN (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

FOUR: Greater Short-toed Lark (Eilat, Israel, 20 April 2000). This image shows a worn bird sleeked down in the heat. It is a small, compact, pale and almost sparrow-like lark which can appear rounded and dumpy or sleek and pipit-like. Note the distinctive contrasting dark centres to the median coverts which may produce a dark line across the wing, reminiscent of Tawny Pipit. Also distinctive is a faint semi-circular 'sub-ocular line' below the eye. The very long tertials more or less completely cloak the primaries – a diagnostic difference from the even rarer Lesser Short-toed Lark.



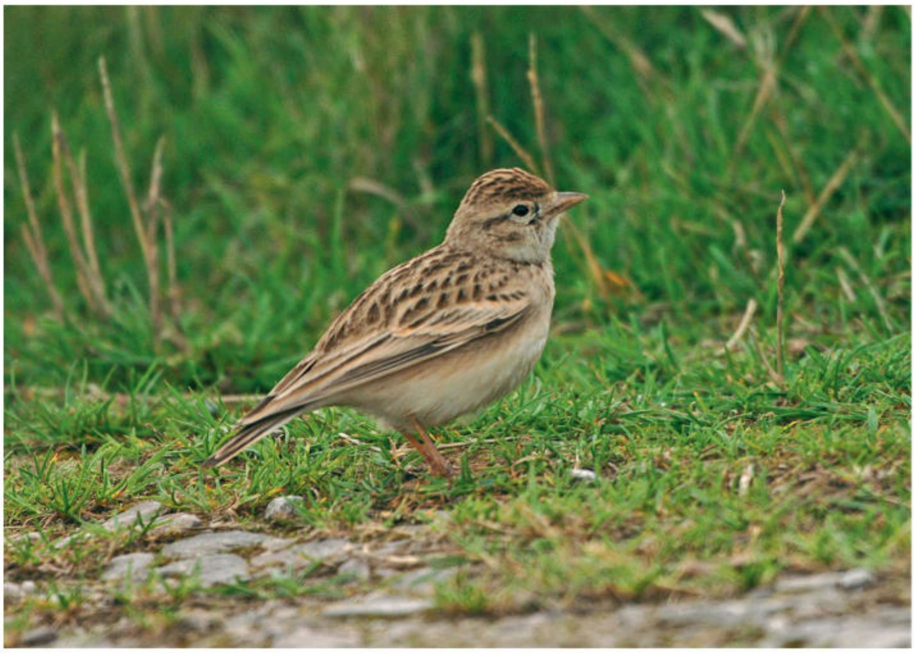
REBECCA NASON (WWW.REBECCANASON.COM)

FIVE: Eurasian Skylark (Fair Isle, Shetland, 6 October 2011). This photograph of a somewhat dishevelled individual shows that, plumage-wise, Eurasian Skylarks can appear rather nondescript with a relatively plain face. When the crest is lowered, the head looks pointed and triangular, rather than 'crested'. Note also the long primary projection (usually longer than Woodlark's). Adult plumage is a mass of streaks, while juvenile skylarks and Woodlarks are noticeably scalloped on the crown, back and scapulars, but this plumage is lost after a complete late summer/early autumn post-juvenile moult.



DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

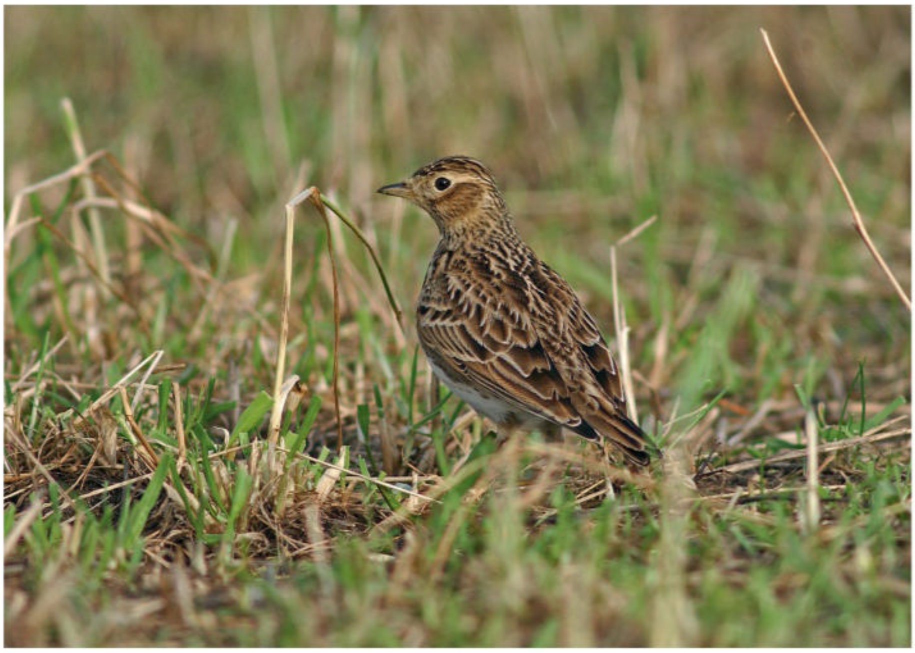
SIX: Woodlark (Tuscany, Italy, 23 May 2006). When settled, a distinctive character of the species is the prominent creamy-white supercilium; the supercilia meet on the nape, producing a pale 'V' or a pale mottled area. The upperparts are strongly streaked black on quite a rich rusty-brown background (brightest in fresh plumage), while the whitish underparts show a strong and obvious breast band of well-defined blackish streaks. Again, this photograph shows well the characteristic 'white-black-white' pattern on the alula and primary coverts, often visible in flight.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

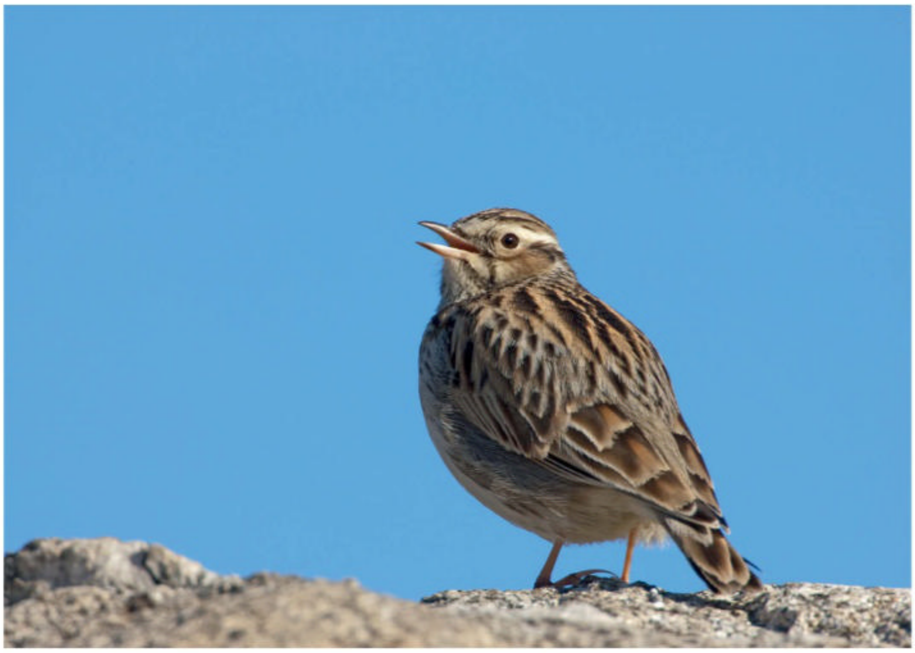
SEVEN: Greater Short-toed Lark (Great Orme, Conwy, 30 September 2006). This bird is plain whitish below, but note the small dark patch on the sides of breast which may be invisible until the bird stretches upwards. Diffuse fine streaking may be present below the dark patches and sometimes also across the upper breast (even in spring). In fresh plumage, the species shows thick, creamy fringes to all the wing feathers. Its legs are a noticeably pale orange or pink and it moves in erratic bursts with a hesitant, jerky walk.

EIGHT: Eurasian Skylark (Newborough Warren, Anglesey, 25 January 2004). As this photograph shows, the crest may be sleeked down, producing a flattened head profile. Although it has an open and pleasant facial expression, the pattern is subdued and rather nondescript, with the both the supercilium and eyestripe being unexceptional. The dark 'sub-ocular crescent' is perhaps the most distinctive feature. It is otherwise a quite large lark with an all-purpose bill, somewhere between a seed-eater and an insect-eater, as befits its omnivorous diet.



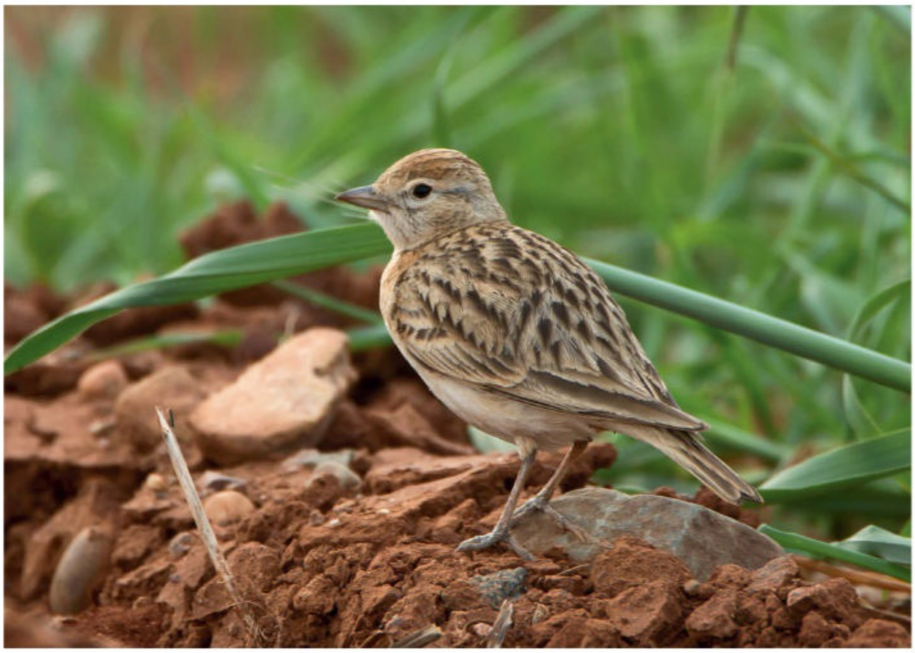
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

NINE: Woodlark (Macedonia, Greece, 11 January 2005). Woodlark is distinctly smaller than Eurasian Skylark and structural differences should instantly attract attention: it usually appears stockier with a short crest and a short tail. In this photograph, it looks oddly Whinchat-like, both in structure and plumage. Woodlark's song is one of the most beautiful of all British birds: rich and mellow but delivered in shorter phrases than Eurasian Skylark, and containing a characteristic clear downward-lilting *lu-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu* – this and its association give it the scientific name *Lullula arborea*. Its distinctive song is often given in a circular song flight.



JARI PELTOMÄKI (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

TEN: Greater Short-toed Lark (Mandria, Cyprus, 5 April 2012). Short-toed Larks usually look pale and sandy compared with the familiar Eurasian Skylark, but they vary in plumage tone across their range, some being sandy, some greyer and others slightly rufous on the crown (these last birds apparently being commoner in Spain and North Africa). It lacks a strong crest, often appearing rather round headed. This, combined with a small but rather thick pale bill, a noticeable creamy supercilium and a dark eyestripe behind a beady black eye, creates a facial expression reminiscent of a female House Sparrow.



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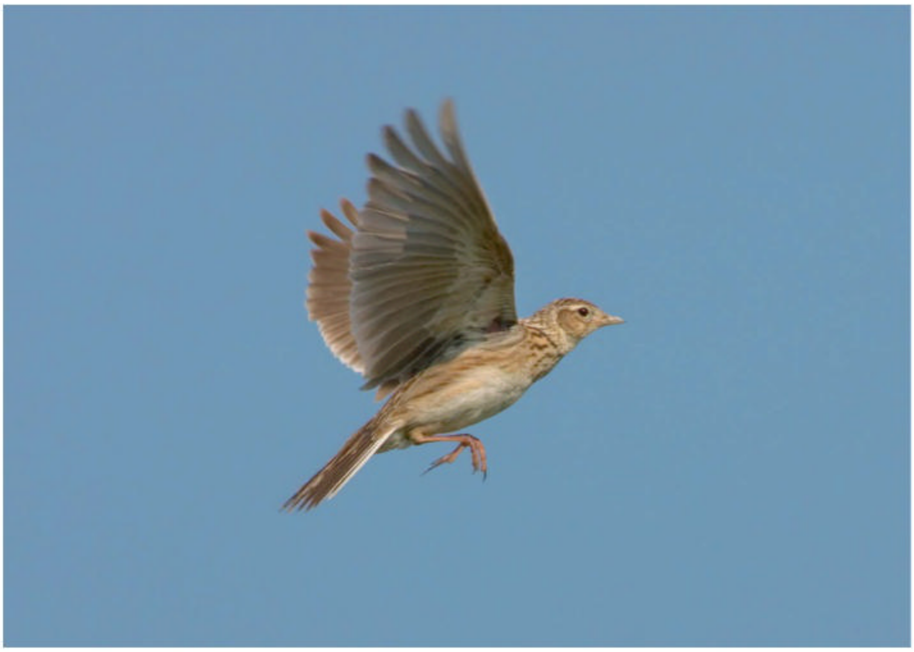
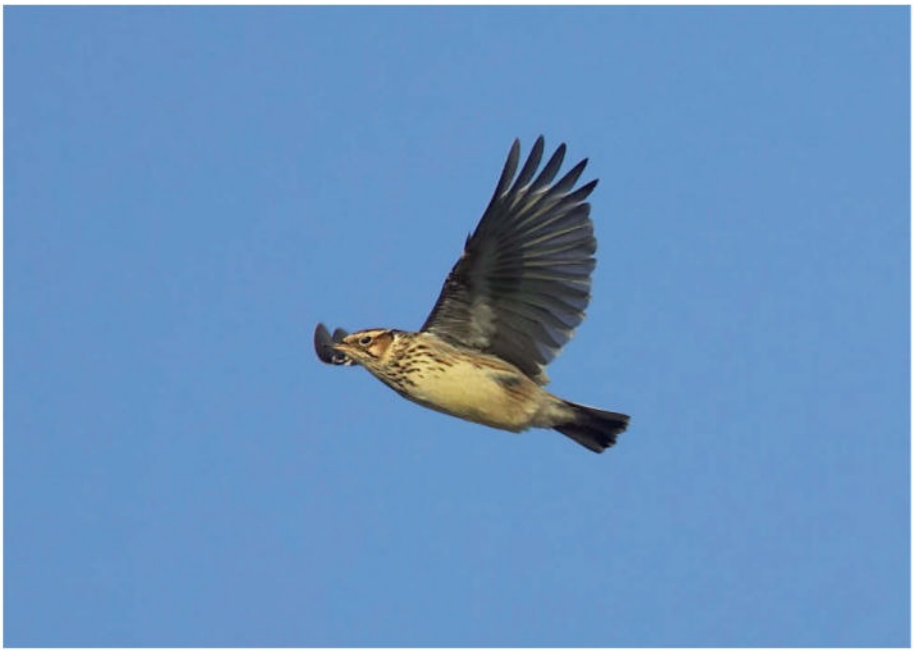
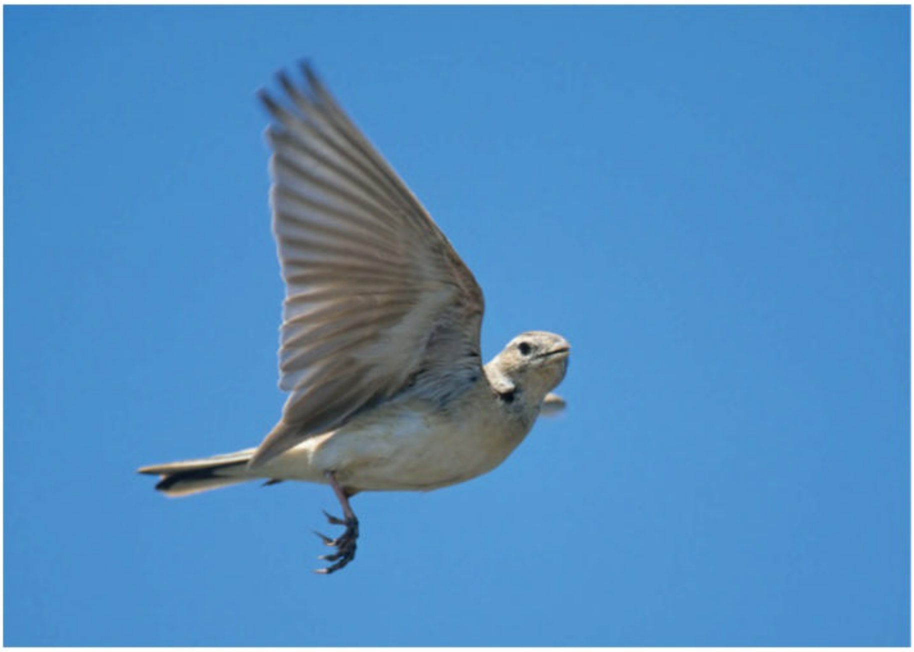

DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

ELEVEN: Eurasian Skylark (Tuscany, Italy, 1 May 2007). In many ways Eurasian Skylark is more distinctive in flight than on the ground. It is relatively slim winged for a lark and evenly proportioned. It shows a conspicuous white trailing edge to the wing and white outer tail feathers. On the breeding grounds it has a distinctive fluttery flight, with the wings bowed strongly downwards. It indulges in aerial chases, hovering above the vegetation before alighting. The most familiar calls are a hard, rippling *chirrup* or *treeip* as well as soft, conversational *see-up* notes.


TOMI MUUKKONEN (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

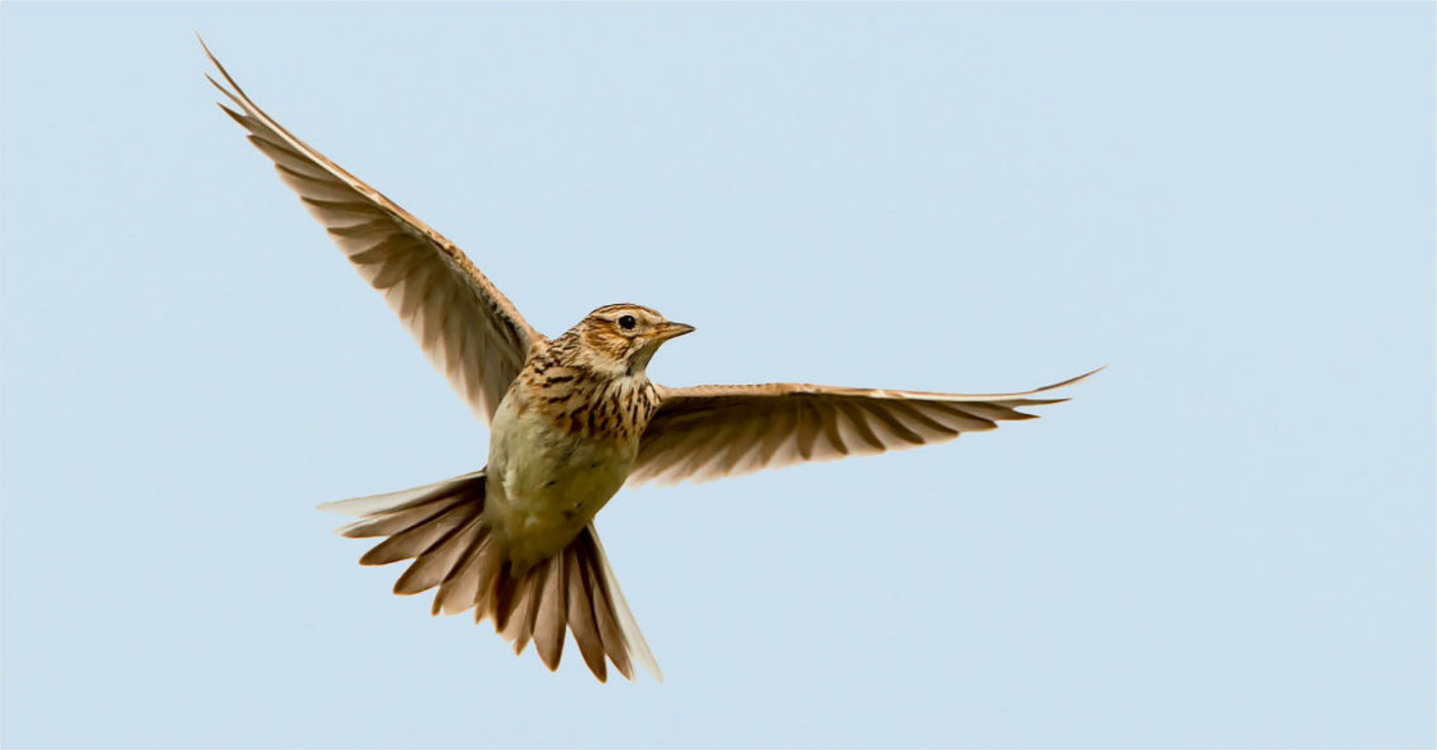
TWELVE: Woodlark (Curonian Spit, Lithuania, 25 September 2006). In flight, Woodlark's short tail is particularly obvious, and it looks very round winged compared with Eurasian Skylark. It also has a jerky, undulating flight (vaguely recalling that of Lesser Spotted Woodpecker). It lacks Eurasian Skylark's white trailing edge to the wing and the outer tail feathers are often sullied with brown; instead, it shows a more obvious white tail tip. Its flight calls are low, soft and musical, but not particularly memorable: *ti-loo-ee, tu-loo, tu-willit, wlee-toloo*.


TOMI MUUKKONEN (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

THIRTEEN: Greater Short-toed Lark (northern Greece, 3 May 2006). In flight, this species appears slim and evenly proportioned, appearing rather more pipit-like than most other larks. Its flight is usually fast and dashing, often close to the ground. It typically looks pale and sandy in flight, but it lacks Eurasian Skylark's white trailing edge to the wings and shows only inconspicuous white outer tail feathers. Its normal flight call is a hard, clipped *t-trip trip* or *trrick trrick*, a more clipped *chr-ip chr-ip* or a more trilling *pirrrick*, all vaguely suggesting a harder, more sparrow-like version of Eurasian Skylark's call.

# Eurasian Skylark, Woodlark and Crested Lark

Words by Kate Risely



TONY COOMBS (WWW.TONYCOOMBS-IMAGES.CO.UK)

ONE: Adult Eurasian Skylark (Rainham Marshes RSPB, Essex, 29 April 2010). The Lark Ascending: singing Eurasian Skylarks can hover up to 150 m in the air, barely visible to the eye and identified only by their characteristic, continuous song. The colour and plumage patterns of larks tend to be similar between species, so it helps to be familiar with shape and structure. Visible in this photo are Eurasian Skylark's white outer tail feathers and relatively short, stubby bill.

The word lark conjures up ease and playfulness: to lark about, happy as a lark. However, getting down to the job of identifying larks may not leave you feeling carefree, as most common larks are generally patterned brown-and-white, differing mainly in structure and subtle plumage patterns. Eurasian Skylark is a relatively common and widespread British bird; Woodlark is locally common, but is rare in northern and western areas. Crested Lark, while plentiful in many parts of Europe, is an extreme rarity on our isles. Here, Kate Risely guides you through the identification features of all three of these similar-looking species.

# Basic Principles

Larks are ground-living birds generally associated with grassland habitats, and are well known for their habit of singing in flight. The open landscapes of southern Europe and north Africa are home to a wide variety of lark species, posing considerable identification challenges, but only two species are generally resident in the UK: Eurasian Skylark and Woodlark. Of these two, the former is by far the most abundant and widespread, with an estimated 1.5 million breeding territories, compared to between 2,000 and 3,000 Woodlark territories. During the breeding season, Eurasian Skylark can be found in almost every 10-km square in the UK, while Woodlarks are confined to their core breeding areas, which are open forests or heathlands in East Anglia, the New Forest, the Thames Basin and Devon, with smaller populations now in the West Midlands, northern England and South Wales. In spring and summer, unless you are on a heathland or in a managed forestry plantation, any lark encountered is most likely to be a Eurasian Skylark. During migration or winter, many Eurasian Skylarks move to lowland stubble fields or coastal areas, where they may mix with Shore Larks, the occasional wintering continental Woodlark or even rarer lark species, which is when an understanding of key ID features becomes most valuable.

## Eurasian Skylark

This species shows its clearest plumage markings in autumn when fresh; by spring the general impression is of a pale greyish-brown bird with a streaked chest and white underparts.

Plumage features to note are the supercilium, which ends above the ear and does not continue round to the back of the head, and the primary coverts, which are uniformly dark, not showing a white wing-bar either in flight or on the closed wing. In flight, look for the white outer tail feathers and paler trailing edge to the wing.

Structurally, skylarks are relatively large, long, chunky birds, with broad triangular wings like a Common Starling, often held angled strongly downwards in flight. Both in flight and perched, the tail appears fairly long, a feature that can be emphasised by the white outer tail feathers. Depending on their mood they can show a short, blunt crest, more prominent than that of Woodlark.

The most characteristic feature of Eurasian Skylark is the song, the 'silver chain of sound', consisting of dry rolling whistling notes continuously descending from the sky for up to 15 minutes at a time. Singing skylarks can be up to 150 m in the air, and it's always a pleasant challenge to try to spot the bird, and marvel at how such a tiny dot can produce such a loud sound.

Eurasian Skylark in full song-flight is unmistakable, and once the timbre of the song has been learned, it's the best way to identify the species in other situations, such as birds singing occasionally from song-posts, or uttering short snatches of song while flitting up and down into arable fields. The calls, like the song, consist of dry rolling sounds, with none of the flutiness of Woodlark calls. While Eurasian Skylark may occasionally perch up on trees or wires, it is most commonly seen on the ground or in flight.

## Woodlark

Eurasian Skylark, as the more common species, is the benchmark against which Woodlark is most usefully compared. Woodlark plumage is overall very similar to that of skylark, but one of the most obvious points of difference is the more striking head patterning. The broad, pale supercilium does not end above the ear, but extends round to the back of the neck, and the pair meet at the back of the head forming a white 'V', resulting in the darker crown appearing as a cap.

Another feature is the patterning of the primary coverts, which are dark with broad buff tips, forming a noticeable dark patch on the closed wing, and also showing as a dark area next to a pale wing-bar on the outer part of the wing in flight.

Structurally, Woodlark has a small, rounded, dumpy appearance compared to Eurasian Skylark, showing blunt, bat-like wings in flight. Woodlark is noticeably shorter tailed than Eurasian Skylark, a feature which is immediately clear on both standing and flying birds to observers familiar with the more abundant species. The short tail can look even shorter in certain lights, due to the white tips to the tail feathers, and Woodlark also lacks the white outer tail feathers shown by skylark.

When seen close up, Woodlark has a pointed, slender bill, compared to the stubbier bill of Eurasian Skylark.

As hinted by its scientific name *Lullula*, Woodlark has a beautiful, sad-sounding, descending song, with distinctive downwards-sliding notes which might be thought of as a cross between Blackbird in tone and Willow Warbler in pattern. While it can sometimes sing from perches, it normally sings in flight, ascending in slow, lazy spirals, lower and more mobile than a singing skylark, which gives the impression of being pinned to the sky. The calls are fluty whistles, very different from the dry calls of skylark.

## Crested Lark

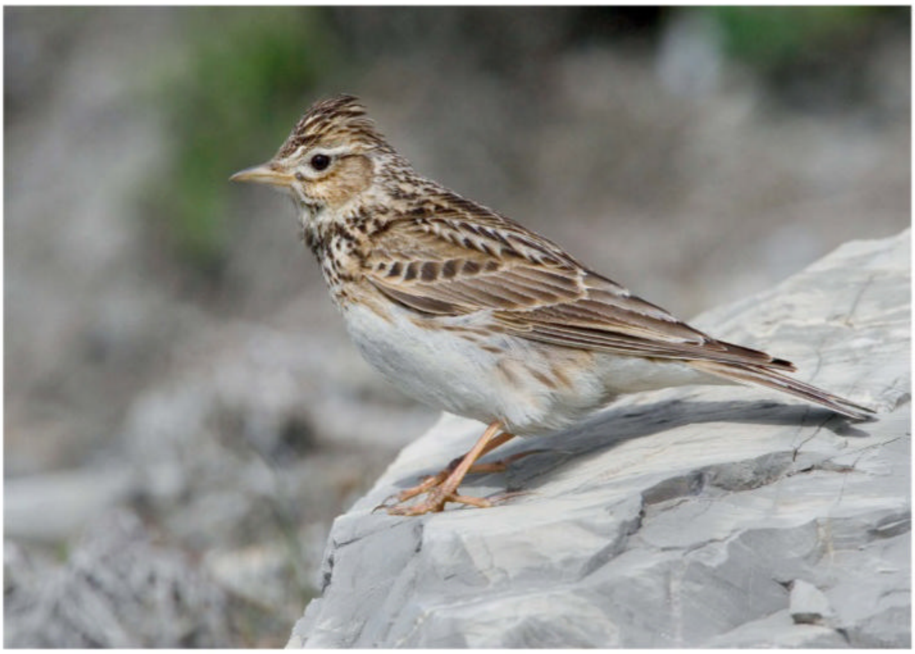
This species is very unlikely to be seen in the UK, being very sedentary in its European range; there have been fewer than 20 recorded here. However, it overlaps with both Woodlark and Eurasian Skylark across much of Europe, and in southern areas it is found alongside many other lark species. In Spain and North Africa, it overlaps with the extremely similar Thekla's Lark; these two species can only be distinguished on close views.

Crested Lark can be found in farmland and other open areas. It gives the impression of being plainer than Eurasian Skylark, with generally greyish-brown plumage, and no clear distinguishing markings on the wings and tail in flight.

It is slightly larger than Eurasian Skylark, with a very different head shape. The crest is long and pointed and often held up, appearing to be roughly the same height again as the head. Even when flattened, it can be seen sticking out at the back of the crown, unlike the smaller crests of Eurasian Skylark and Woodlark.

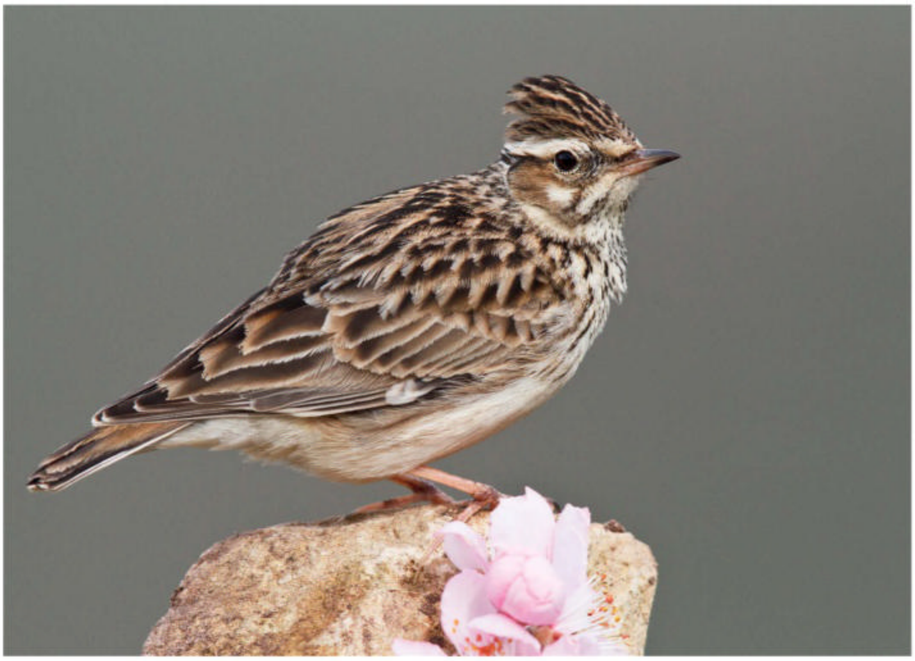
Another striking difference is the long, straight bill, nearly as long as the head, and clearly larger than that of Eurasian Skylark. Crested Lark is a vocal bird, often uttering short phrases of drawn-out, ringing notes, and with a long, varied song often given in flight.

TWO: Adult Eurasian Skylark (Tuscany, Italy, 21 May 2006). In size, Eurasian Skylark is larger bodied than most pipits or finches, but smaller than Common Starling. When alert or perched they sometimes stand upright, crest raised, but normally when on the ground their bodies are held horizontally, and the crest is flattened and invisible. With good views, as shown here, the plumage details can be seen, but from a distance the overall impression is of a pale brown and white bird, large bodied, with a small head and a long tail. As with most larks, it's not possible to distinguish between males and females on plumage.



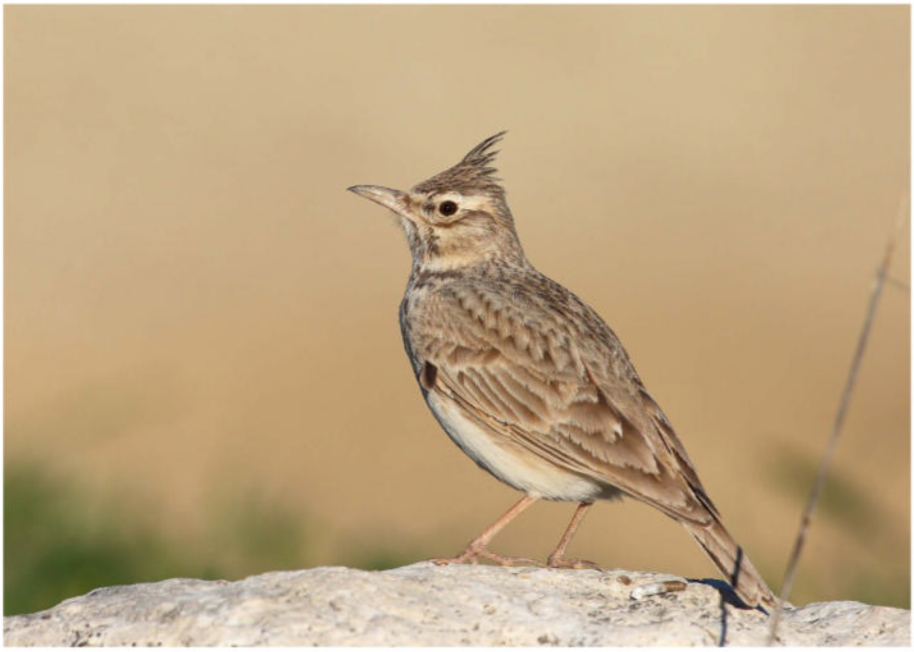
DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

THREE: Adult Woodlark (Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany, 3 March 2014). Woodlark is more richly coloured than Eurasian Skylark, with much more noticeable facial features including a striking supercilium and a dark cap. With good views the dark and pale patches formed by the primary coverts on the folded wing can be seen, but this feature can be hard to make out; in this photo only the pale patch, formed by the tips of the primary coverts, is visible. Woodlark is smaller than its Eurasian cousin, closer in size to House Sparrow, and with a noticeably short tail.

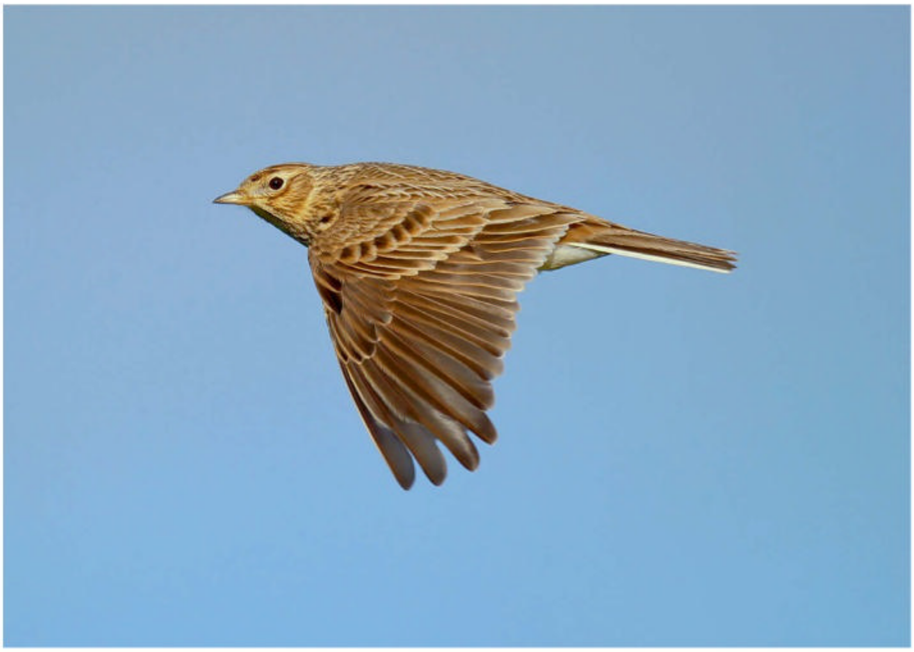


ROSL ROESSNER/BIA

FOUR: Adult Crested Lark (Valladolid, Spain, 7 April 2016). Crested Lark is slightly larger than Eurasian Skylark, between House Sparrow and Common Starling in size. It has few distinguishing plumage features, showing fairly plain brown upperparts, particularly when the feathers are worn, and white underparts with streaking on the breast. The most noticeable features are the long, prominent bill and tall, spiky crest; even when the crest is folded flat against the head it can still be seen.

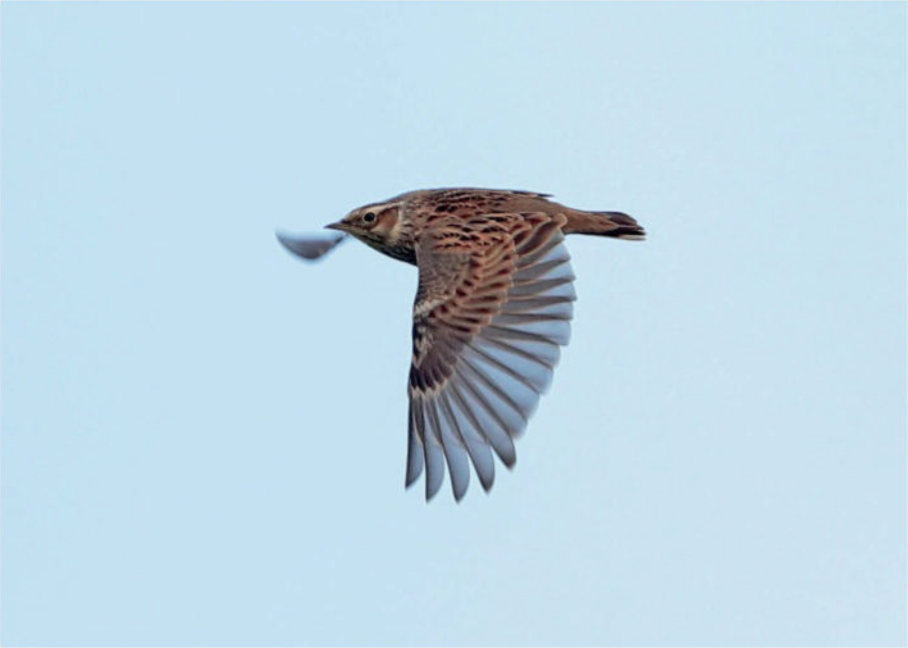


CARLOS BOCOS



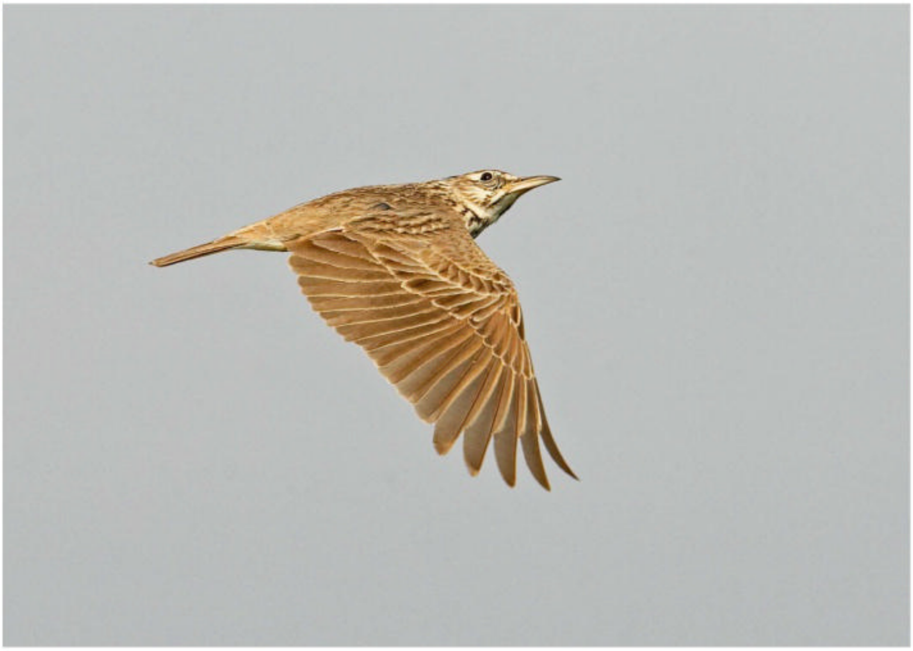
RAN SCHOLS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FIVE: Adult Eurasian Skylark (Limburg, The Netherlands, 23 March 2013). All larks show broad bases to the wings when in flight, and in this picture the triangular wing shape of Eurasian Skylark can be seen. Relative to the body and wings, the head and bill appear to be small, and the tail is fairly long. This photo shows the white outer tail feathers, which can be noticeable in a bird flying away from you, and the white trailing edge to the wing, which is often hard to see.



RAN SCHOLS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

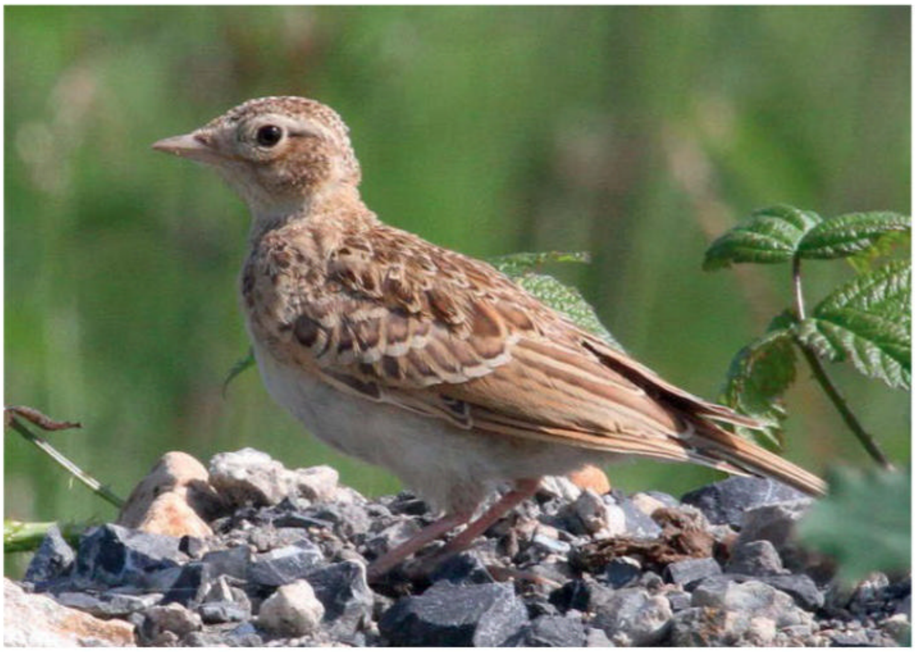
SIX: Adult Woodlark (Limburg, The Netherlands, 13 October 2017). Woodlark often calls in flight, with its characteristic liquid notes, very different to the dry calls of Eurasian Skylark. Even in flight, the richness of the markings can sometimes be seen, including the supercilium, and the complex patterning of the wing showing the dark centres and white tips of the primary coverts. However, the best features to note on Woodlarks in flight are the short tail and broad, rounded, bat-like wings.



MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

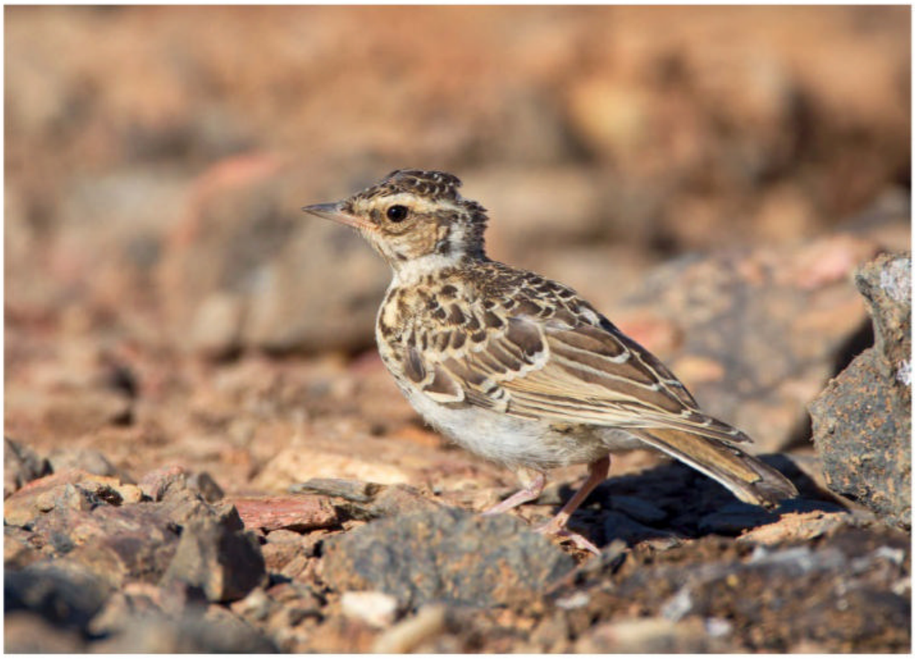
SEVEN: Adult Crested Lark (Oman, 16 March 2006). The large bill of Crested Lark can be seen even in flight. While the wings are broad based, like all larks, Crested Lark has longer and less triangular wings than Eurasian Skylark, and overall appear bulkier, with a heavier head and body. It lacks the pale trailing edge to the wing and the white outer tail feathers shown by Eurasian Skylark, and has rufous-tinged underwings.

EIGHT: Juvenile Eurasian Skylark (Picardie, France, July 2010). Eurasian Skylark nests on the ground in arable farmland, grasslands and uplands, and recently fledged juveniles can be encountered on the ground in these habitats. As in many species, juveniles have pale buff fringes to the feathers of the upperparts, giving them a patterned, paler appearance. While they have a pale supercilium, the feathering on the rest of the head is also light in colour, so the supercilium does not stand out in comparison. Shown in this photo is the species' relatively short, stubby bill.



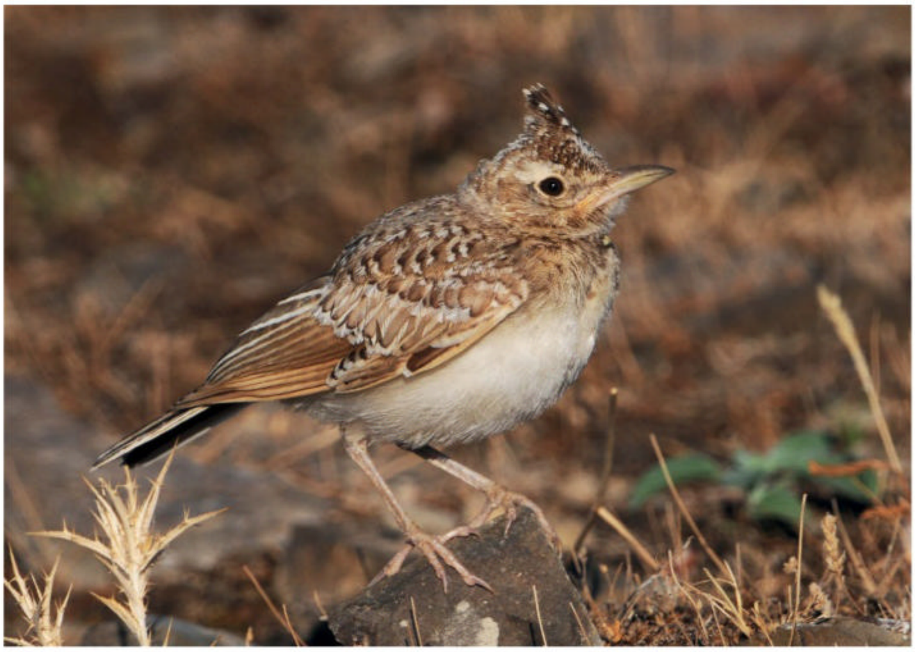
SERGE VANTRIMPONT

NINE: Juvenile Woodlark (Aljustrel, Portugal, 14 July 2016). This juvenile Woodlark also shows pale-fringed feathers, but with darker background tones giving a more strongly contrasting appearance, particularly on the head. The legs of Woodlark appear to be set further back on the body than Eurasian Skylark, due to the shorter tail, and it has a slightly more pointed bill. In the UK, juvenile Woodlarks can be found on heathlands, and in felled areas in forestry plantations.



HARVEY VAN DIEK (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

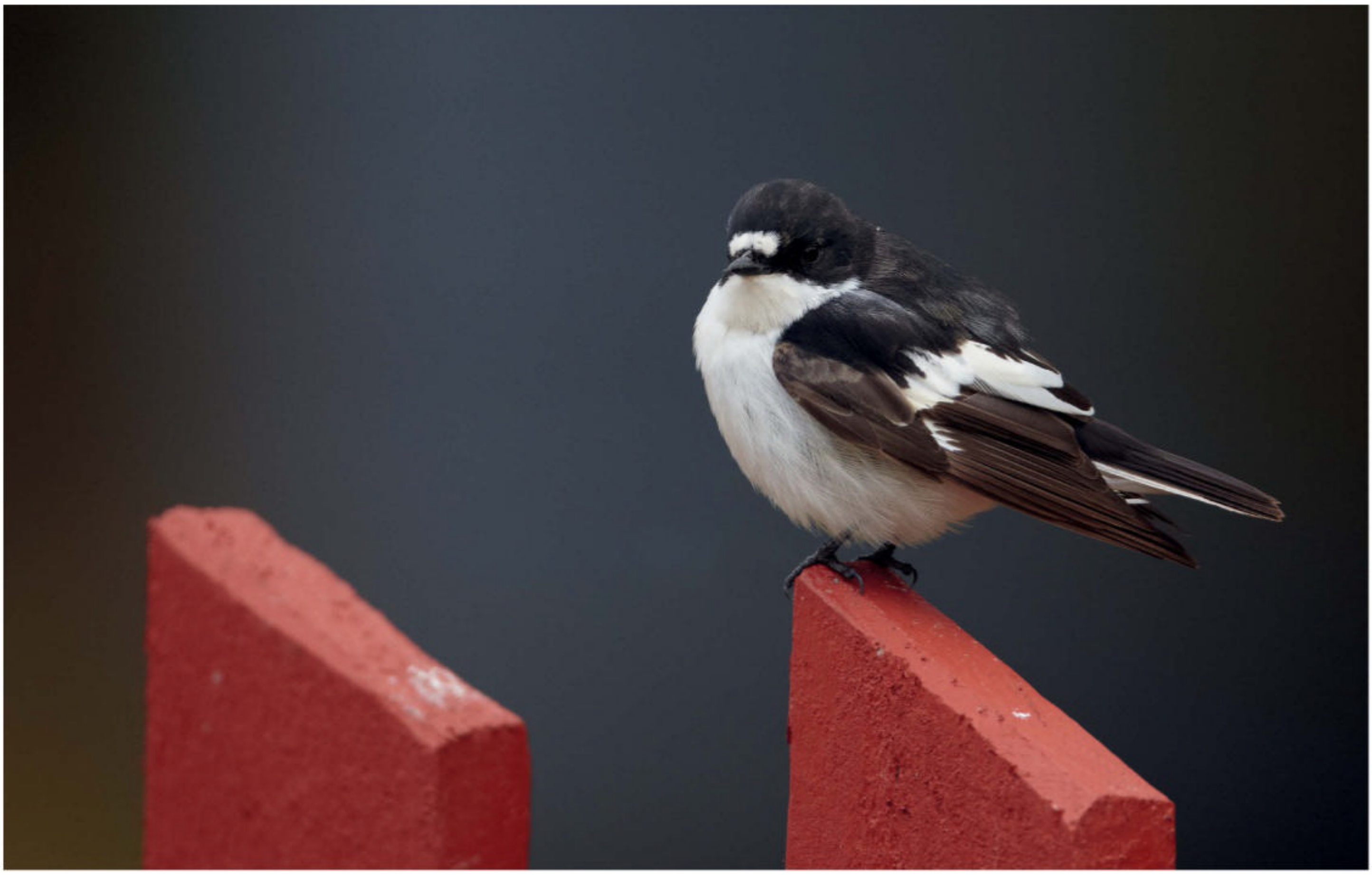
TEN: Juvenile Crested Lark (Faro, Portugal, 22 July 2012). Juvenile Crested Larks show the same bulky body, large bill and spiky crest as the adults, as well as the pale-fringed feathers typical of juveniles. In the southern parts of its range Crested Lark overlaps with the very similar Thekla Lark; one way to tell them apart is to look at the bill shape, as Crested Lark has a straight lower edge to the long bill, though this difference can be subtle.



RAY TIPPER

# Pied and Collared Flycatchers

Words by Andy Stoddart



MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

ONE: Male Pied Flycatcher (Utö, Finland, 10 May 2010). This charming portrait shows the typical male Pied Flycatcher combination of black upperparts and startling white underparts, with a small white forehead patch (here towards the larger end of the range), extensive white in the outer webs of the tertials and the inner greater coverts, and a small white primary patch restricted to the base of the inner primaries. This bird shows contrastingly brown wing feathers and is therefore in its first summer.

There are few more confounding identification problems in British birding than the black-and-white *Ficedula* flycatchers, particularly – but certainly not always – the females and immatures. Andy Stoddart braves the difficulties and demonstrates that, while there will always be problematic birds, many will be 'doable' in the field by paying the right amount of attention to detail. Use our photo-rich ID guide this spring and autumn to enjoy the subtle variety of these charming passerines, and perhaps even find your own rarity.

# Basic Principles

The identification of the ‘black-and-white flycatchers’ is one of the most troublesome problems around. Pied Flycatcher is the default species in Britain, but Collared Flycatcher is a viable target, albeit a very rare one. Although typical spring males of these two species are normally (though not always!) straightforward to identify, more serious problems are posed by spring females, first-winter birds, hybrids and the outside chance of even rarer forms.

## Pied Flycatcher

This species breeds widely across central and northern Europe (including Scandinavia) and western Russia and winters in central west Africa. April sees the return of British breeders to western woodlands and Continental birds can appear on eastern coasts. In early autumn, Pied Flycatchers are scarce migrants, though large ‘falls’ of European birds can occur on the east coast.

Adult males in spring are basically black above and white below. They have a small white patch – often separated as two small white dots – on the forehead and a large white mid-wing patch, formed by white in the tertials and inner greater coverts. Many show a small white ‘flash’ at the base of the primaries, alongside the primary coverts.

Male plumage is variable, however, and a few – for example a much-discussed bird at Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire, in spring 2012 – may show anomalous features such as a larger white forehead patch and a larger white primary flash.

First-summer males are often identifiable by their rather brown, worn primaries, but there is also geographical variation in male plumages. While British and Scandinavian spring males are generally fully black above, birds from eastern Europe and western Russia (particularly first-summer birds) show variable amounts of brown in the upperparts and some are wholly brown above. In this respect they resemble females, but are a little darker and can also be identified as males by the presence of white forehead markings and extensive white in the mid-wing.

Spring females and first-winter birds in autumn are a soft pale brown above. They lack white forehead markings, show a much more restricted white mid-wing patch and have a small (or no) primary flash, which doesn’t extend onto the outer primaries.

First-winters have a soft buff wash to the breast and weak buffy malars, while some also have whitish tips to the median coverts, forming a short second wing-bar.

Migrant Pied Flycatchers can be noisy, typically giving a loud, insistent *whit* call.

## Collared Flycatcher

Collared Flycatcher breeds mainly in central and eastern Europe, the Ukraine and south-west Russia. Despite its relative proximity to Britain, however, it remains a very rare bird here, with only 35 records to the end of 2012, almost all in the east in spring.

With their very large white forehead patches, broad and complete white collars, large white mid-wing patches, greyish-white rumps and large white rectangular primary flashes, adult male Collareds in spring are both stunning and easy to identify.

First-summer males (as with Pieds, identifiable by their rather brown primaries) can be a little more problematic, however. These can show a smaller forehead patch, smudgy grey tones in the central nape and smaller white primary flashes.

Spring adult females are more of a challenge to identify. They resemble female Pieds, but are a little greyer toned, show a faint suggestion of a pale nape, a suggestion of a pale rump and a large white rectangular primary flash. All these features are somewhat variable, however, and are less evident on first-summer birds.

The real problem arises with first-winter birds in autumn. Tellingly, only a couple have been identified in Britain and both of these had to be confirmed in the hand.

In autumn, most of the clues available on spring females are missing. There is no difference between the two species in first-winter plumage in upperpart hues, nape or rump markings. The only clue that a bird might be a Collared is a more extensive ‘club-shaped’ white primary flash which extends onto the outer primaries and therefore almost reaches the leading edge of the wing. The precise pattern is, however, best assessed in the hand or, perhaps, in a photograph. If a first-winter Collared is suspected, it’s time to call for a mistnet or a photographer (or both)!

The call of Collared Flycatcher is very different from that of Pied – a high, rather drawn-out *heeep*.

## Pied x Collared hybrids

To complicate matters further, the incidence of Pied x Collared Flycatcher hybrids is quite high. Hybridisation is frequent in the Baltic where the ranges of the two species meet. As expected, the appearance of hybrids falls somewhere between that of the parent species, though can be similar to either, and of course, second generation hybrids might be even less distinguishable.

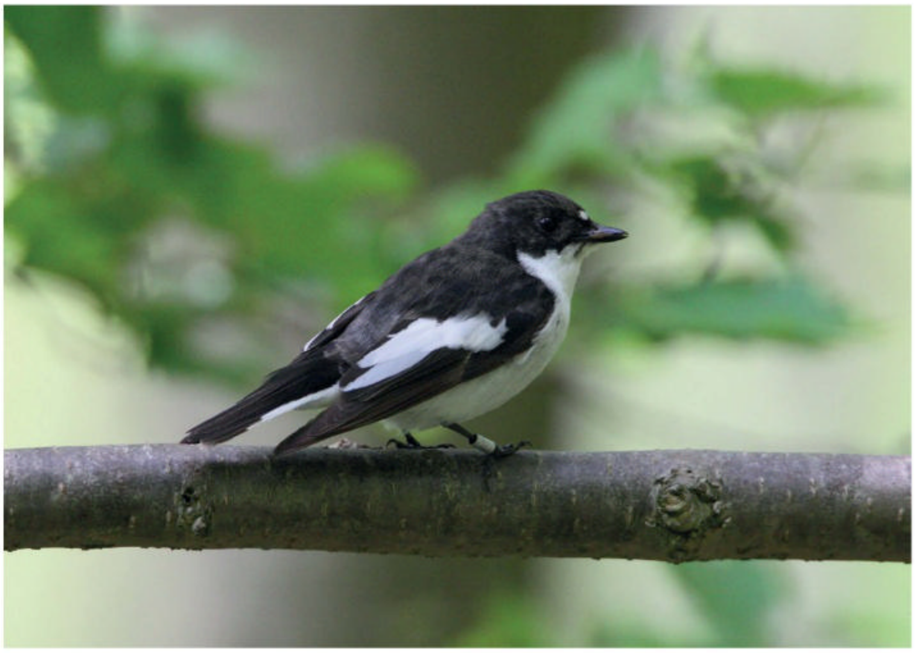
Only spring male hybrids are likely to be identifiable, given the difficulties in identifying genetically pure birds in other plumages. Signs of hybridisation in a spring male include a reduced white forehead patch, a broad dark nape interrupting the collar and a reduced white primary flash. However, these features can also be shown by genetically pure first-summer male Collared Flycatchers.

## Other options

Nor are the problems fully over. Three other forms of black-and-white flycatcher occur in the Western Palearctic. So far, none has reached Britain, but there is potential for any of them to do so.

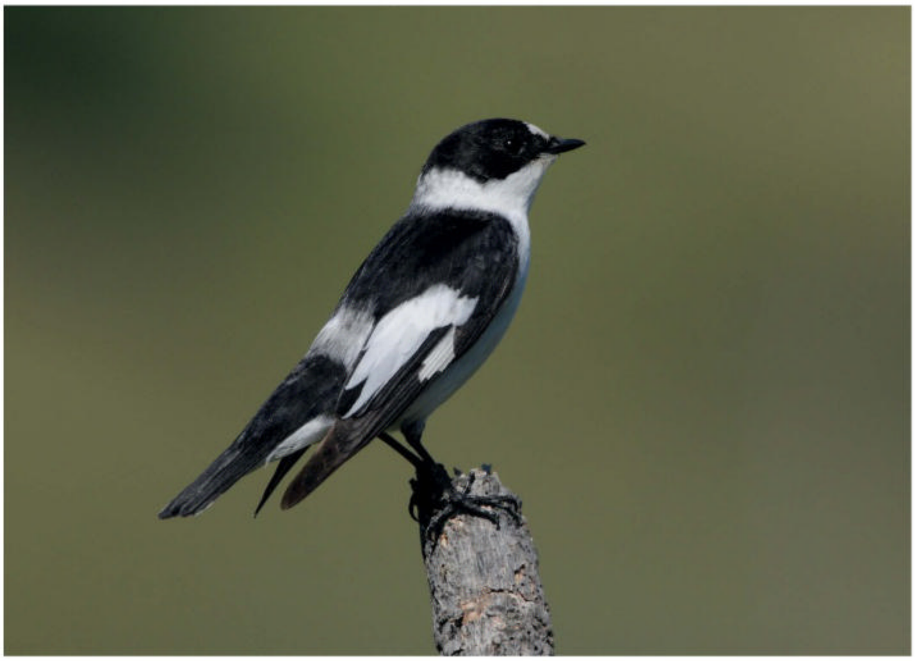
The first of this trio is Semicollared Flycatcher of south-east Europe, Turkey and the Caucasus. Males are similar to Pied, but with a slightly larger forehead patch, whiter neck sides, white tips to the median coverts and larger white primary flashes. Second is the now-split Atlas Pied Flycatcher from north-west Africa. Again, males are like Pied, but with a massive white forehead patch, larger white mid-wing patch, whiter neck sides and larger white primary flashes. Finally, to confound matters further, the iberiae form of Pied Flycatcher (known as Iberian Pied Flycatcher), breeding in Spain, shows characters which closely approach those of Atlas Pied Flycatcher.

A full treatment of these taxa is beyond the scope of this article. Identifiable within their home ranges, their identification in a vagrant context would be highly problematic. Males would need careful separation from Pied x Collared Flycatcher hybrids, while females and first-winters may simply be unidentifiable.



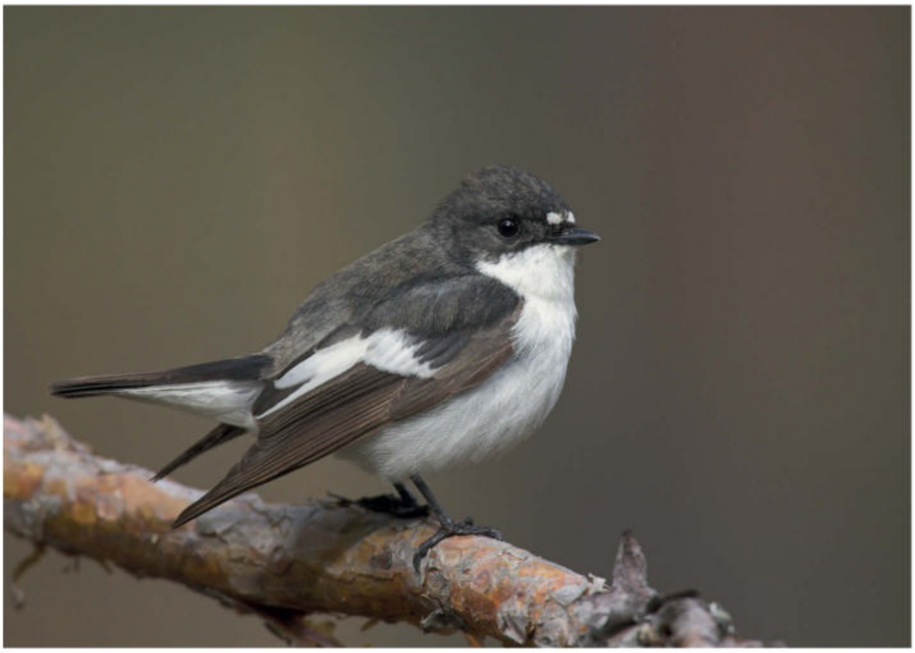
JIM ALMOND (WWW.SHROPSHIREBIRDER.CO.UK)

TWO: Male Pied Flycatcher (Purlogue, Shropshire, 23 May 2008). This male is slightly less visually striking than that in photo one. In particular, its forehead patches are smaller, here more typically forming two dots, and the white in the primary bases is so limited that none is visible beyond the primary coverts. Such an appearance is normal, however. Note the pale greyish rump on this bird – a regular though somewhat variable feature.



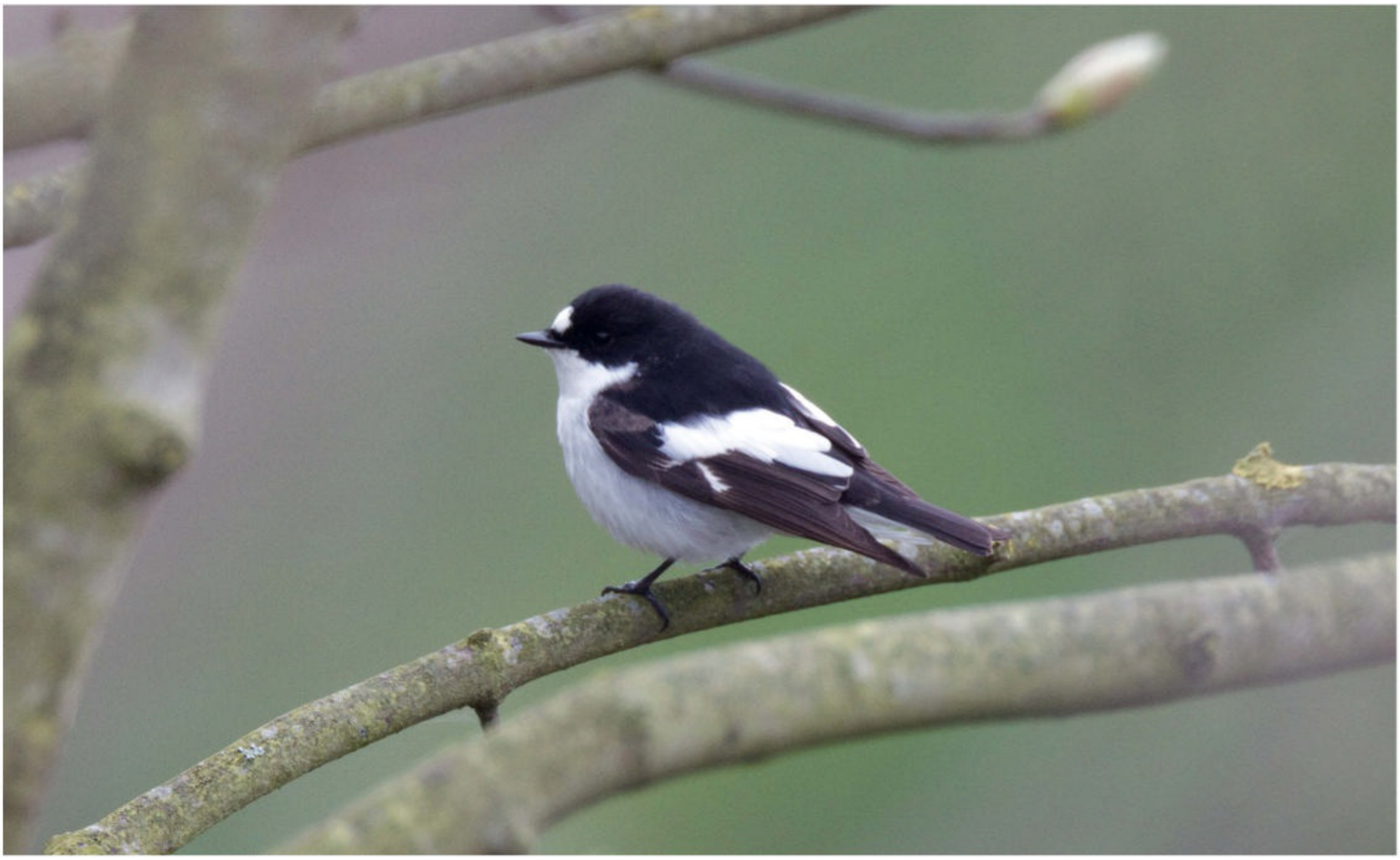
RICHARD BROOKS (WWW.RICHARD-BROOKS.CO.UK)

THREE: Male Collared Flycatcher (Lemnos, Greece, 30 April 2011). This is a striking bird indeed and therefore easy to identify. Its combination of extensive white forehead patch, broad white collar, large white mid-wing patch, very large white primary patch and near-white rump are diagnostic of male Collared Flycatcher. The primary patch is, as with many features of black-and-white flycatchers, somewhat variable, but on this bird it is truly massive, forming a large semi-rectangular area which extends way beyond the primary coverts and almost reaches the leading edge of the wing.



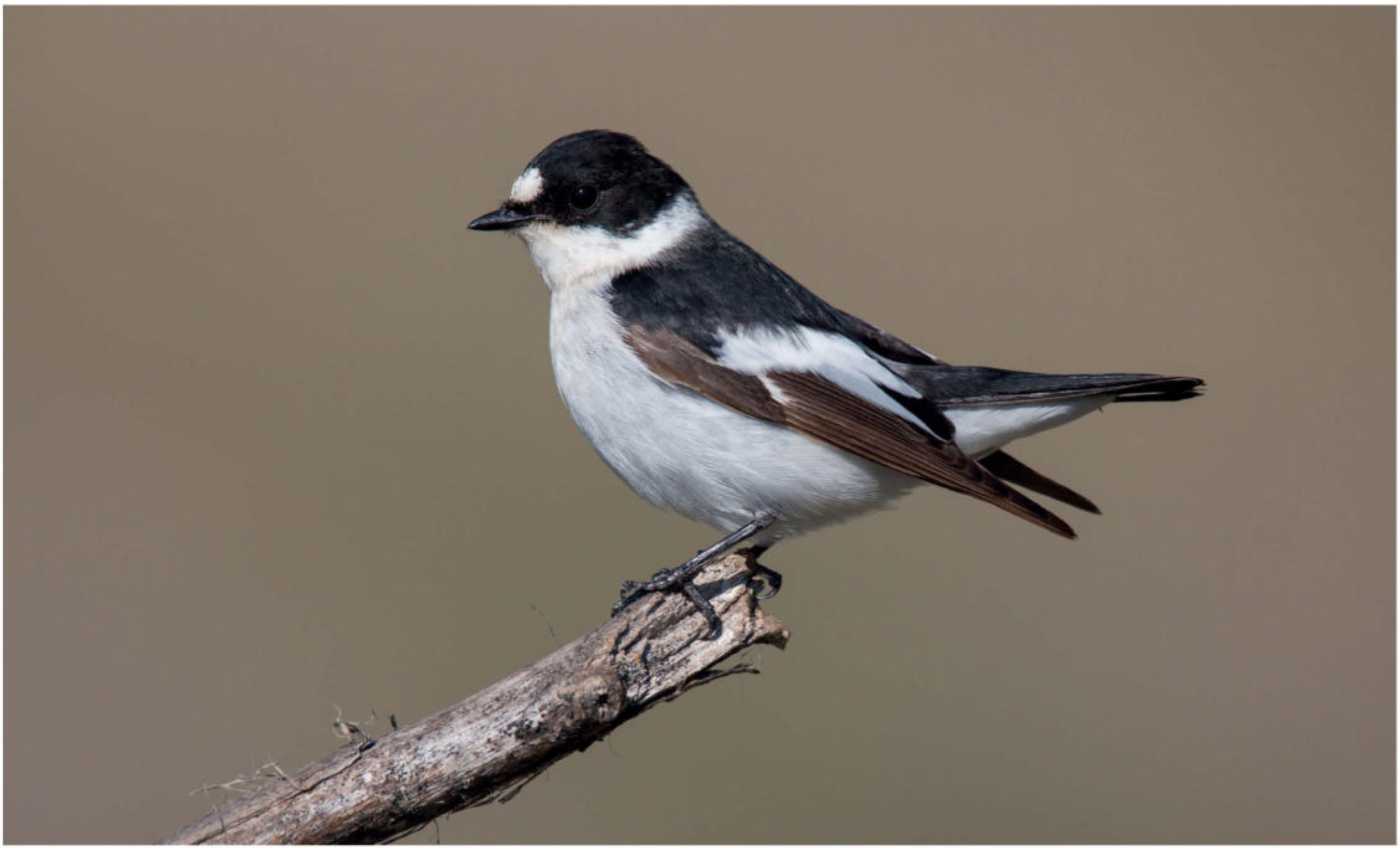
JARI PELTOMÄKI (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FOUR: First-summer male Pied Flycatcher (Oulu, Finland, 26 May 2004). As in photo 1, this bird shows strongly contrasting old brown unmoulted flight feathers and outer wing coverts, and can therefore confidently be aged as a first-summer. It shows the typical paired dots on the forehead and the white primary patch is absent. The most interesting aspect of this bird is that it shows grey and brown hues in the upperparts, often shown by birds from more easterly parts of the range.



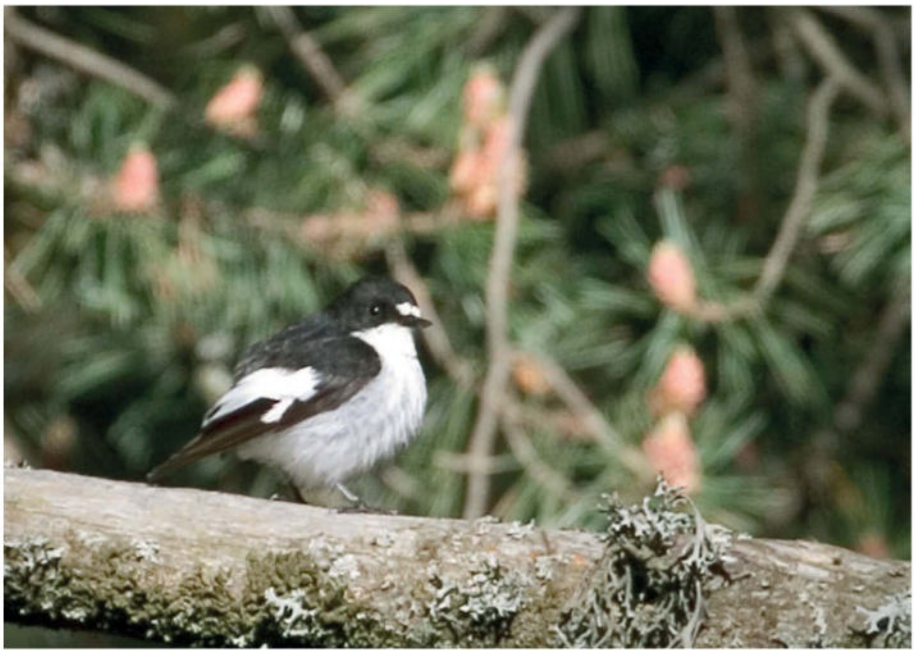
GRAHAM CATLEY

FIVE: Male Pied Flycatcher (Flamborough, East Yorkshire, 30 April 2012). This is the infamous 'Flamborough *ficedula*' of spring 2012, one of the most talked-about birds of that season. Its extensive white mid-wing patch, good-sized primary patch and, most notably, massive white forehead prompted understandable speculation that it might be something else: a Pied x Collared Flycatcher hybrid, an Iberian Pied Flycatcher or an Atlas Pied Flycatcher. DNA analysis, however, showed it to be a Pied Flycatcher (albeit a visually unusual one) – an excellent lesson in the plumage variability of all black-and-white flycatchers.



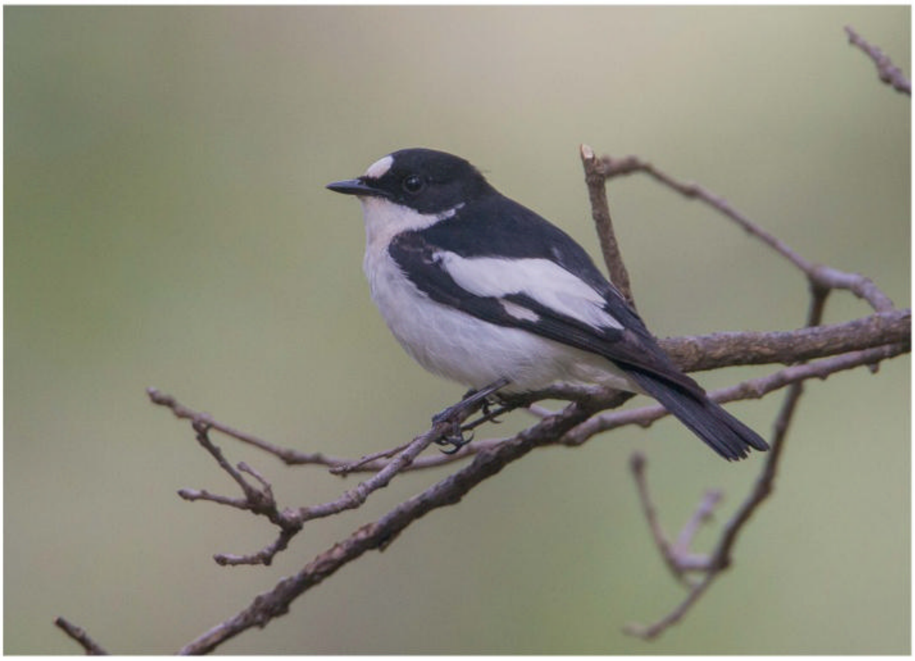
OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

SIX: First-summer male Collared Flycatcher (Lesvos, Greece, 22 April 2007). This bird shows the typical massive white forehead patch and white collar of a Collared Flycatcher. However, there is some limited dark feathering on the central nape, effectively 'breaking' the collar, while the primary patch is small, within the range of Pied Flycatcher. So what is it? The very brown contrasting primaries provide the clue – this is a first-summer Collared Flycatcher, with such birds frequently showing interrupted collars and reduced white primary patches. A hybrid Pied x Collared Flycatcher might be very similar, but the appearance of this bird is entirely typical of a first-summer male Collared.



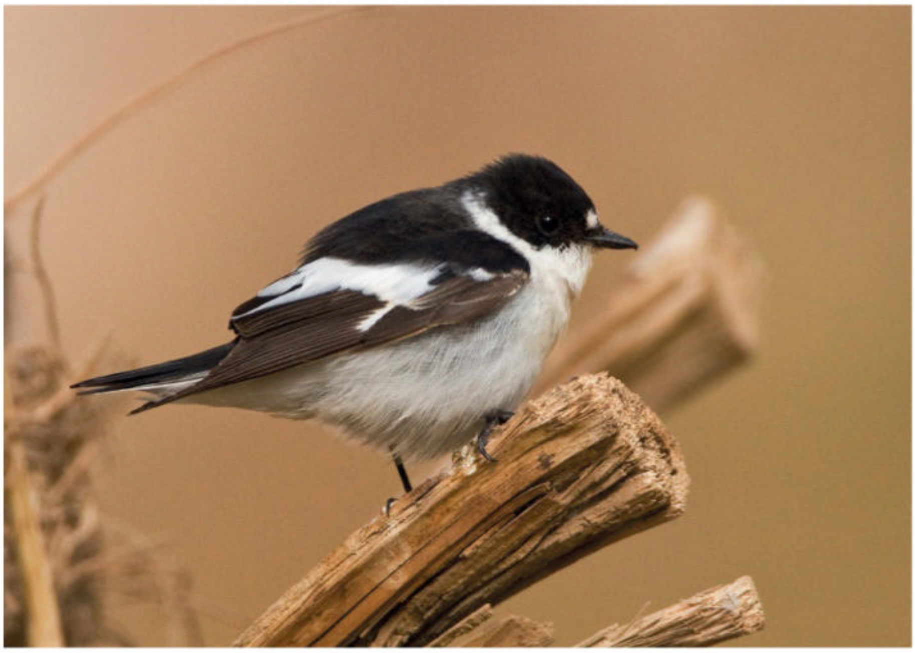
IAN MERRILL

SEVEN: Male *iberiae* Pied Flycatcher (Gredos, Spain, 18 June 2007). To confuse matters, the breeding Pied Flycatchers of Spain's central mountains have, as here, large white forehead patches, large mid-wing patches and sometimes massive primary patches. They most closely resemble the Atlas Pied Flycatcher of north-west Africa, but are genetically closer to Pied Flycatcher. This taxon is unrecorded in Britain, but could conceivably 'overshoot' in spring. It would, however, pose considerable identification problems here, needing to be separated from an anomalous Pied Flycatcher, an Atlas Pied Flycatcher and a Pied x Collared Flycatcher hybrid!



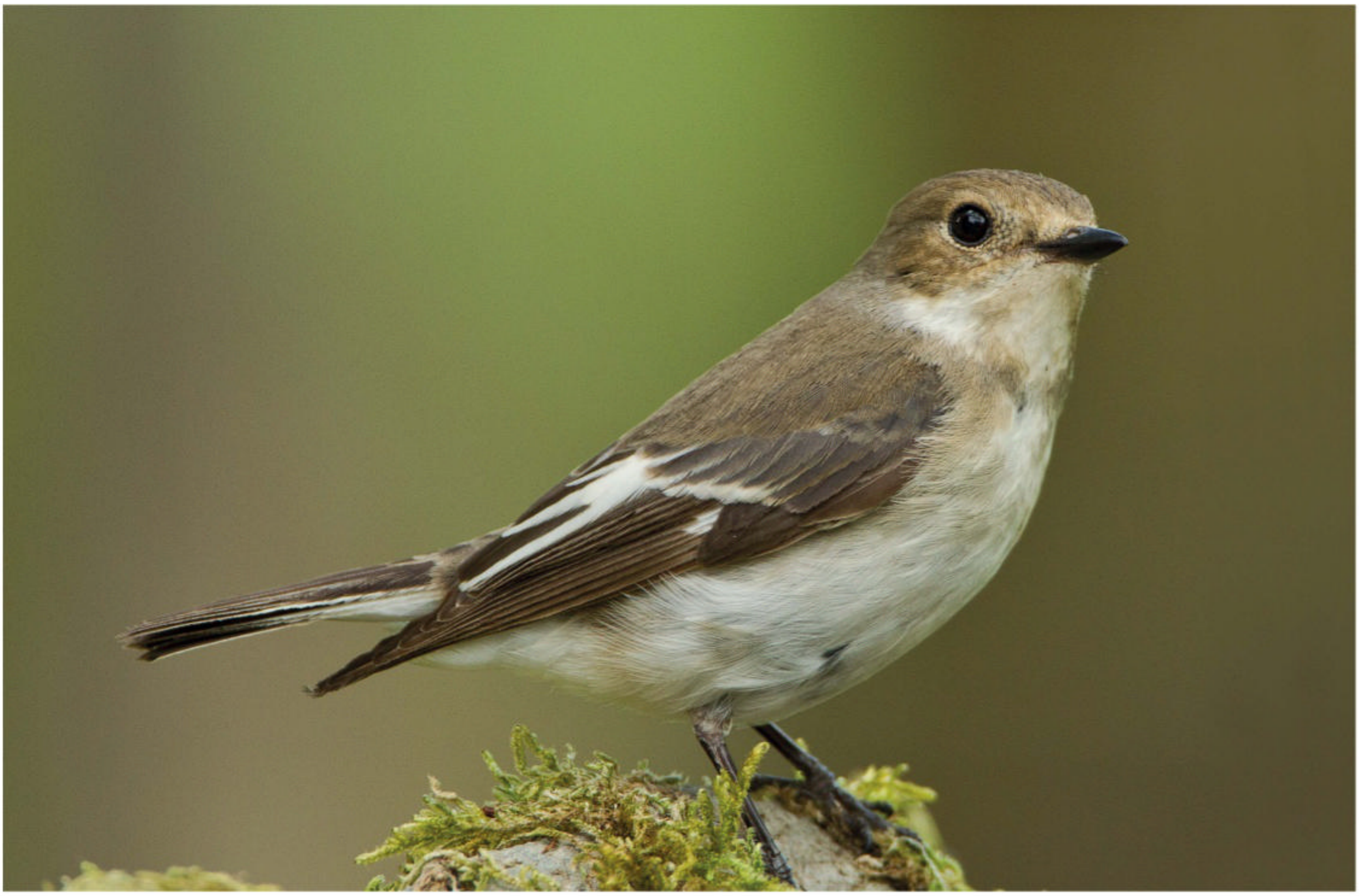
RAFAEL ARMADA (WWW.RAFAELARMADA.NET)

EIGHT: Male Atlas Pied Flycatcher (Ifrane, Morocco, June 2009). This bird shows the relatively massive white forehead, large white mid-wing patch and very large white primary patch of Collared Flycatcher. However, there is no white collar, only slightly more white on the neck-sides than on a Pied Flycatcher. Such features might be shown by a Pied x Collared Flycatcher hybrid, but this bird's location gives it away – it is a male Atlas Pied Flycatcher on its breeding territory. Also unrecorded in Britain, it is another potential vagrant and potential identification nightmare!



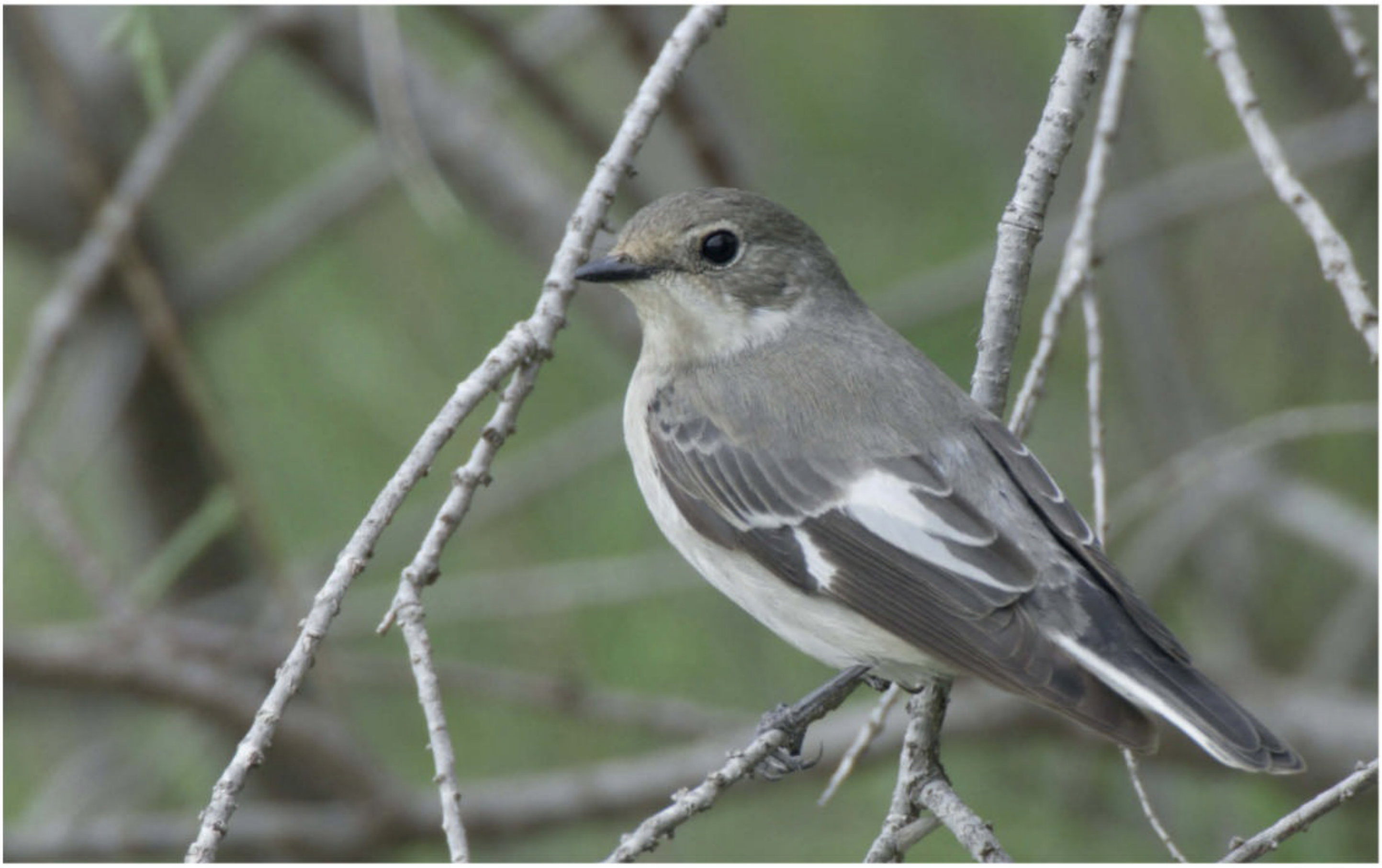
MARC GUYT (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

NINE: Male Semicollared Flycatcher (Eilat, Israel, 25 March 2012). This bird's most striking feature is its partial collar, resembling that of Collared Flycatcher but broadly interrupted at the rear. Could it be a first-summer Collared Flycatcher or a Pied x Collared Flycatcher hybrid? The median coverts provide the evidence to discount these two options. This is yet another taxon of black-and-white flycatcher: Semicollared Flycatcher. Key to its identification is the unique presence of white tips to at least some of the median coverts (though on many birds these overlay the white bases to the greater coverts and are easy to miss).



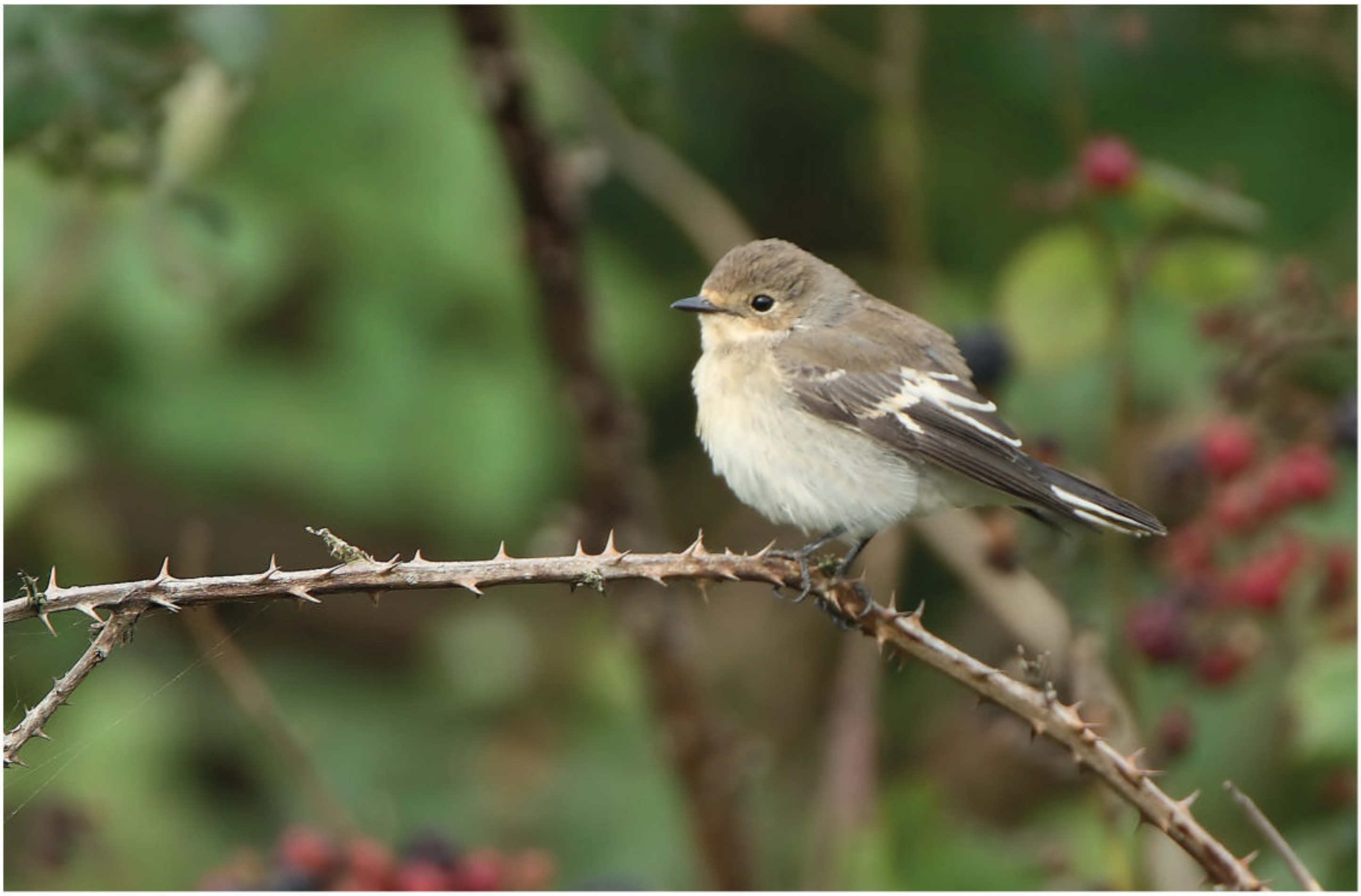
TONY COOMBS (WWW.WINGSANDTHINGSPHOTOGRAPHY.CO.UK)

TEN: Female Pied Flycatcher (Gilfach Farm, Radnorshire, 28 May 2012). This mousey-brown female flycatcher shows a typical set of Pied characters, notably a small white primary patch restricted to the primary bases, not extending past the tips of the primary coverts and falling well short of the leading edge of the wing. As ever, of course, this is a variable feature and many females show no visible patch at all.



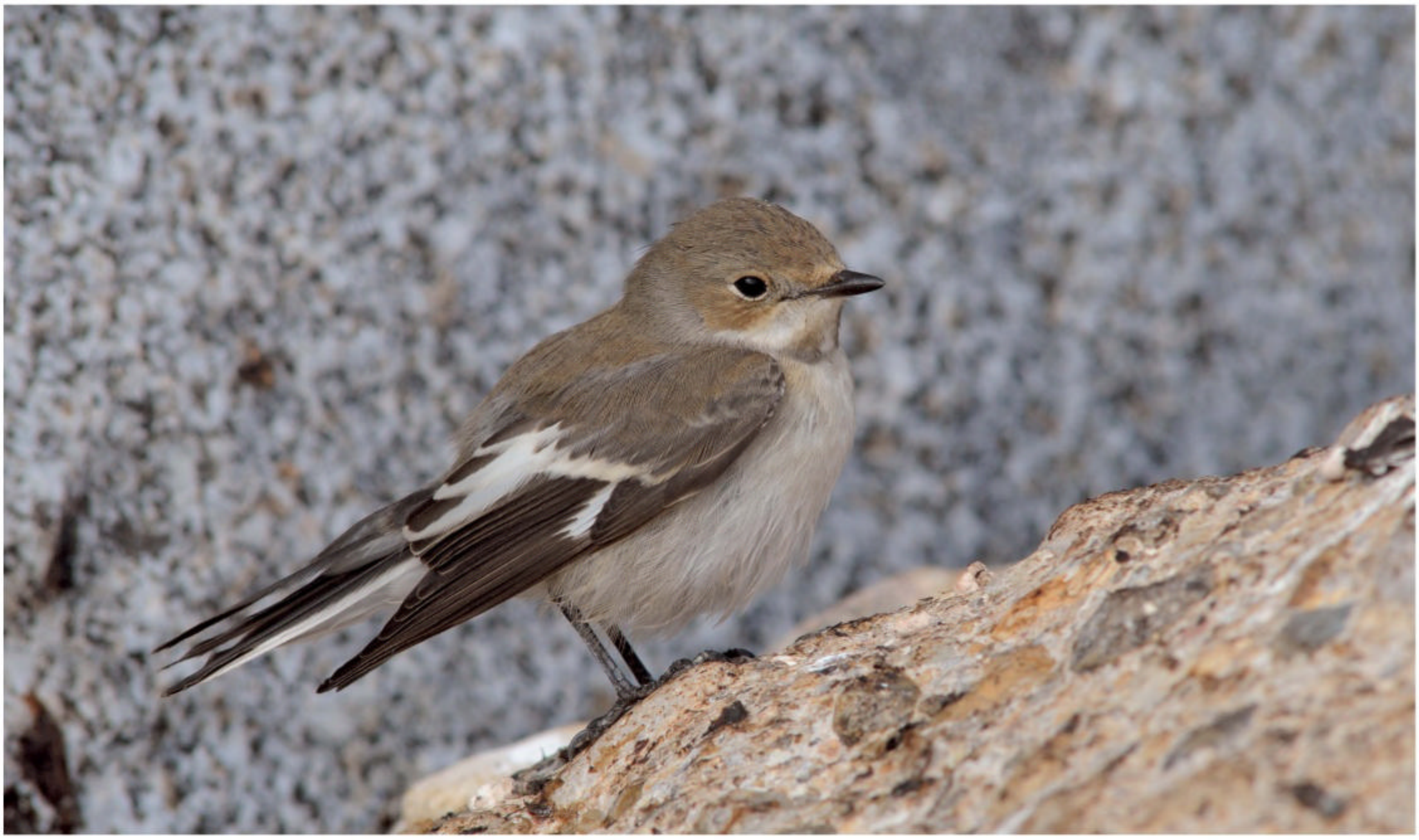
MIKE DANZENBAKER (WWW.BIRDIMAGENCY.COM)

ELEVEN: Female Collared Flycatcher (Cyprus, 22 April 2007). At first sight this is another female Pied Flycatcher, but a closer look reveals two interesting aspects of its appearance. Firstly, its rump is contrastingly pale grey and, more importantly, its primary patch is relatively large and 'club shaped'. It extends beyond the tips of the primary coverts and approaches the leading edge of the wing. These two features in combination provide plenty of evidence that this is, in fact, a female Collared Flycatcher.



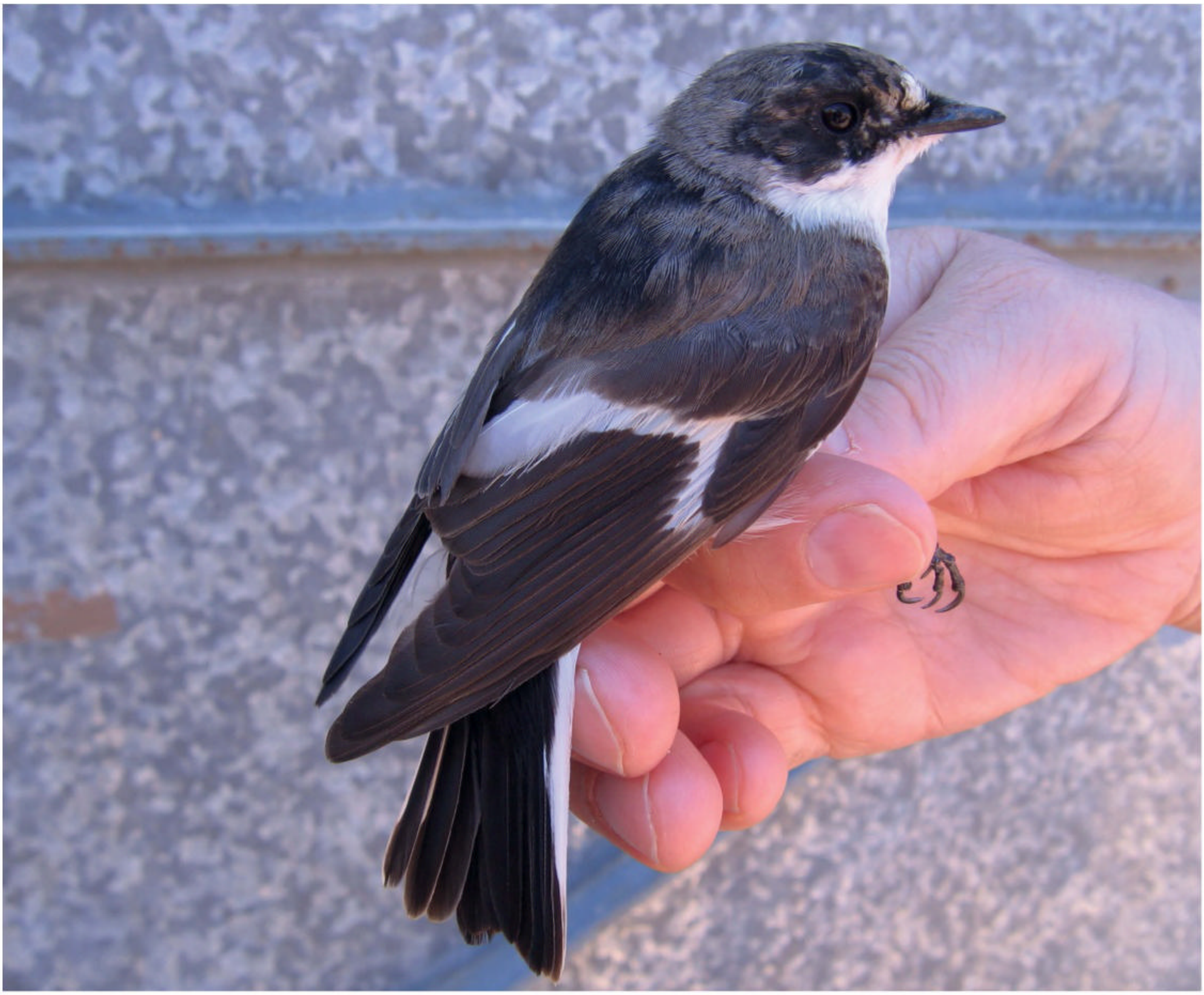
ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

TWELVE: First-winter Pied Flycatcher (Winterton-on-Sea, Norfolk, 15 September 2008). This is a typical first-year black-and-white flycatcher. The primary patch is of a reasonable size and the median coverts show some pale tips, but both these features are entirely within the range of young Pied Flycatcher and there is nothing in the appearance of this bird to suggest any other species. Pied Flycatcher must always be the default option in Britain and indeed most of Europe.



ROEF MULDER

THIRTEEN: First-winter Collared Flycatcher (Heligoland, Germany, 27 September 2008). There are almost no features to guide identification of first-autumn black-and-white flycatchers. However, the primary patch can be useful on those individuals where it is either small or absent (indicating Pied) or very large and prominent (indicating Collared or something else). On this bird the primary patch is very large, forming a semi-rectangle on the closed wing which extends past the tips of the primary coverts and reaches towards the leading edge of the wing. Although not all young Collared Flycatchers show a primary patch this big, on those that do (as here) it is diagnostic.


RAYMOND GALEA

FOURTEEN: Hybrid Pied x Collared Flycatcher (Comino, Malta, 28 April 2008). This bird's moderate-sized forehead patch and patchy grey hues in the upperparts are typical of Pied Flycatcher, but it also shows slightly whiter neck-sides than normal, while its primary patch is very large and Collared Flycatcher-like, way outside the range of Pied. It is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a Pied x Collared Flycatcher hybrid. With these occurring routinely as close as the Baltic, they represent a real option for any troublesome bird in Britain.

## Find your own Pied and Collared Flycatchers

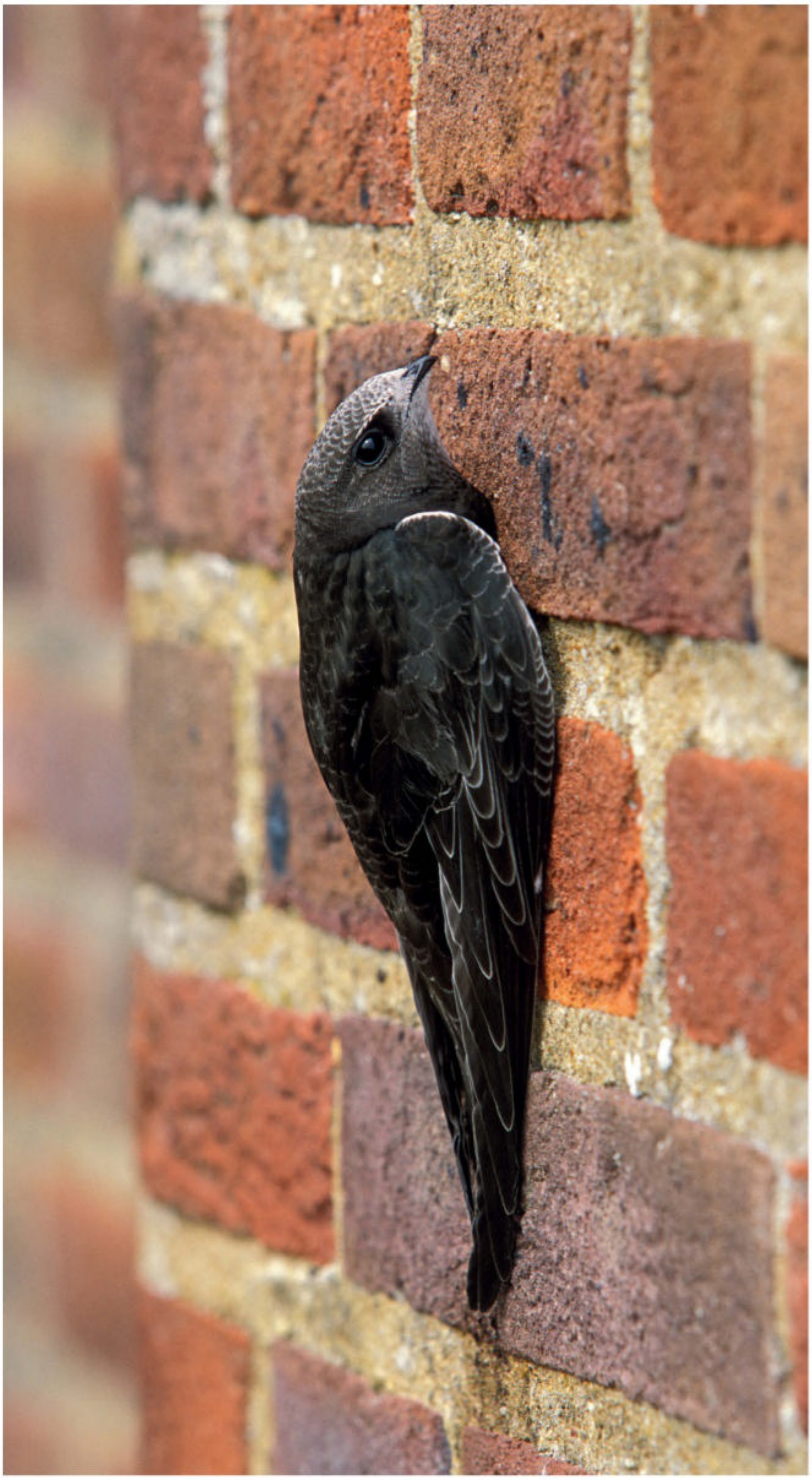
Pied Flycatcher is a fairly common but declining summer migrant to western and northern Britain, often specialising in oakwoods. Passage birds on their way to northern and eastern Europe are also occasionally seen at southern and eastern migration watchpoints, and sometimes occur in small falls. Good sites for breeding birds include Nagshead RSPB in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire (SO 606085), the wooded Welsh valleys and hillsides, or the Forestry Commission's Mabie Forest, Dumfries and Galloway (NX 9273), which has a 'flycatcher walk'. Migrants may be seen at sites like Portland, Dorset (SY 6972), Wells/Holkham, Norfolk (TF 9041), and Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire (TA 2570), but are more numerous in autumn.

Collared Flycatcher is a bona fide mega-rarity in Britain, with around 40 accepted records, though on occasion up to three have been seen in one year, most recently in 2011. As with all rarities, they can turn up anywhere but are far more likely on east-facing coasts like Shetland and north Norfolk.

Semicollared, Atlas Pied, Iberian and hybrid Pied x Collared Flycatchers have not occurred in Britain as far as we know, but are all possible and when they do show up they will probably be at one of the well-known bird observatories or migration hubs.

# Common and Pallid Swifts

Words by Andy Stoddart



RAFAEL ARMADA (WWW.RAFAELARMADA.NET)

ONE: Juvenile Common Swift (Aylesbury, Bucks, mid-July 2002). Perched, Common Swift looks black and sooty with a restricted pale area on the forehead and throat. The plumage otherwise is uniform overall, lacking obvious areas of contrast, but juveniles like this show a distinctive head pattern and have narrow but clear-cut pale edges to the wing feathers.

Spring into summer, and again in late autumn, are times in which the familiar Common Swift has to be separated from Pallid Swift, its rarer southern congener, which probably occurs here more often than is currently known. Close not only in plumage but genetics as well, the species pair is one of the trickiest in British birding, but with good views, close comparison and experience, the two are identifiable in the field by the conscientious birder. Andy Stoddart takes a fresh look to establish the definitive identification criteria.

# Basic Principles

Of the many 'species pair' problems to confront a British observer, this duo has to be one of the most troublesome. Common Swift is, of course, a well-known bird, widespread and common throughout most of Britain and a familiar sight in our summer skies. However, familiarity should not breed contempt. Only those intimately acquainted with Common Swift will stand much chance of nailing a Pallid, and while we might think we know our spring birds well, what about the browner, scaly juveniles of late summer and autumn? Do we really pay them that much attention?

Pallid Swift is, by contrast, a real rarity, with only around 75 records in Britain to date, almost all since 1999. Most turn up in late October and November, and their appearance is now somewhat predictable.
They occur in the warm sectors of Atlantic low-pressure areas, arriving in Britain in the strong mild south-westerly winds which follow the passage of a warm front.

Their origin is presumably Iberian or North African – meaning they are of the form brehmorum – but they are not generally found on south-west-facing coasts. Moving rapidly across the country, they are located when they reach the east coast.

Increasingly, however, Pallid Swifts are being found in spring as well, especially in the South and South-West, and this is a bird which could now turn up almost anywhere. Interestingly, spring birds have recently been found as early as late March, although records continue through into June.

The identification context is therefore very different depending on the date. In early spring and late autumn, no swift can be identified, even provisionally, on the basis of probability. Common Swifts occur in the same weather conditions which bring Pallids, so each bird has to be examined closely on its own merits. Conversely, between early May and September the overwhelming majority of swifts will be Commons and picking out a Pallid will then be a matter of real persistence, skill and luck.

## Field characters

Common and Pallid Swifts are very similar in both plumage and structure and, of course, both are famously fast and mobile. We may see them only as a brief fly-by or as a pinprick in the sky, and they can range rapidly over large distances.

Identification comes down to the evaluation of subtle structural characters and plumage hues which are slight and change with the flight mode and angle of light, and are therefore hard to interpret. Low down, in flat light and against a dark background, plumage hues can be easier to evaluate, but high in a bright sky or on a drab March or November day such subtleties can disappear, and any swift will just look dark.

Nor are photographs a 'magic bullet'. A series of images might present a whole variety of confusing impressions, rendering the same bird sometimes dark and sharp winged, at other times paler and more blunt winged, while a single image can be even less helpful. Photographs are even more likely than the human eye to record partial, and therefore potentially misleading, impressions.

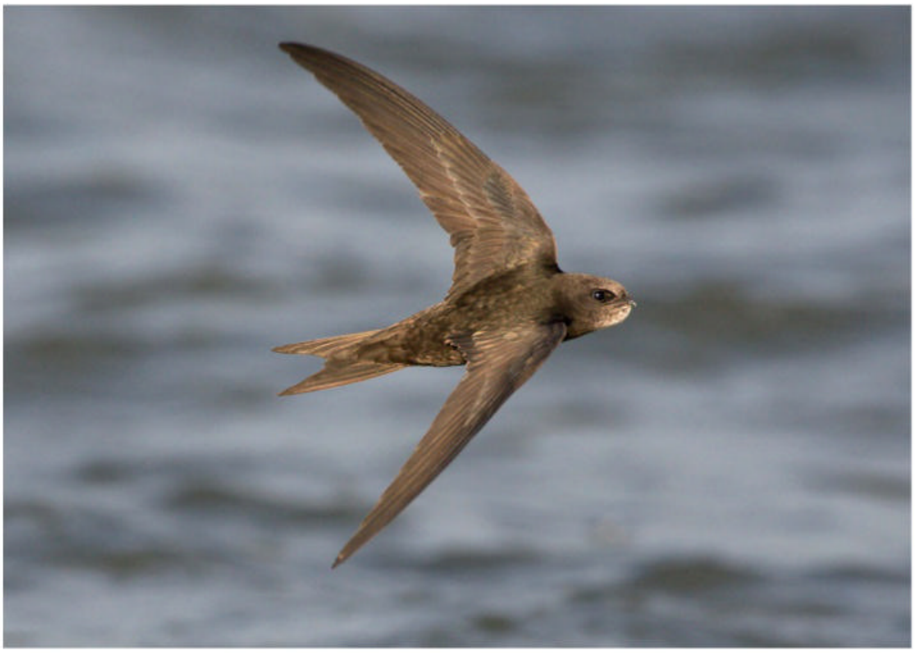
Needless to say, Pallid Swift is a nightmare for record assessors! After a brief 'free-for-all' period when pretty much any late autumn swift was hailed as a Pallid, common sense has returned and the Rarities Committee is now taking a commendably tough line with the species. Nevertheless, although some swifts must be left unidentified due to inadequate views, with patience, experience and a clear head, many should prove identifiable.

So, what are the key identification features? Structurally, Pallid Swift is a slightly chunkier bird, most obviously so in the breadth of its body and its head. Head on, it can appear rather wide faced, while the body is stocky, including the rear body behind the wings. The tail fork is also relatively shallow and blunt. Pallid Swift also appears slightly broader in the hand and more blunt winged, with a slightly slower, heavier and more mechanical wing action.

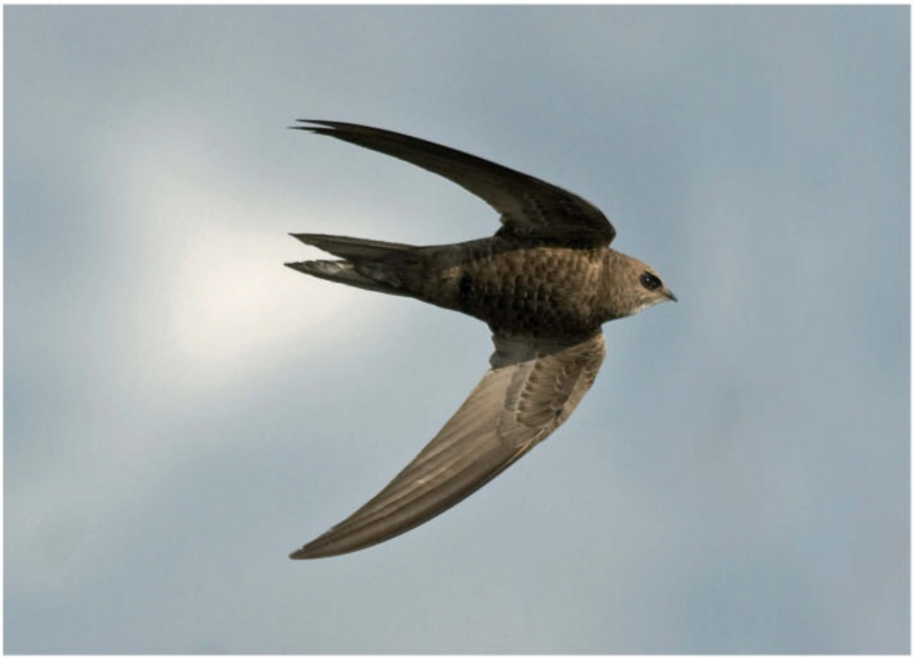
In terms of plumage, Pallid Swift is a paler, more milky brown. The white throat patch is large and blurry at the edges and the forehead patch is also large, both features accentuating the dark eye shading. The underbody of adults is very lightly scaled in spring, but of course juveniles of both species are scaled below. Pallid Swift should also show something of a contrast between a darker mantle and wing coverts, paler secondaries and inner primaries and dark outer primaries.

## Other forms

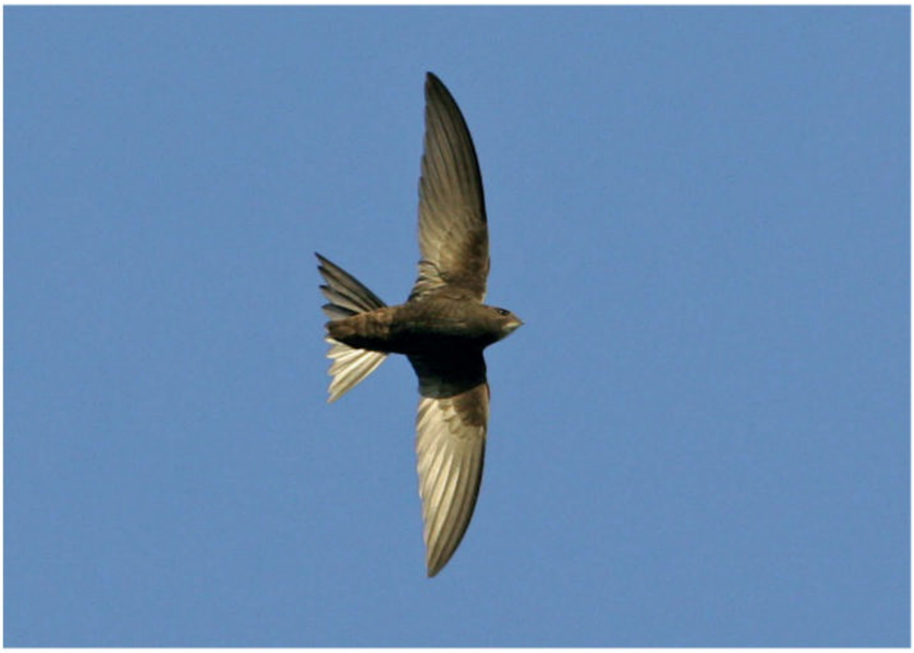
A final fly in the ointment is the potential occurrence of other swift forms. Other forms of Pallid Swift such as the darker *illyricus* from the Adriatic and the paler more southerly and easterly pallidus could occur. And what of *pekinensis* Common Swift? Although unrecorded in Britain, it has a huge northern Asian range from Iran eastwards and, given the vagrancy history of other swifts, it must surely have occurred already. The chances of nailing one in the field must be slim, but perhaps any slightly pale-looking swift trapped or found dead should be examined with great care.


RAN SCHOLS (WWW.PBASE.COM/RANSCHOLS)

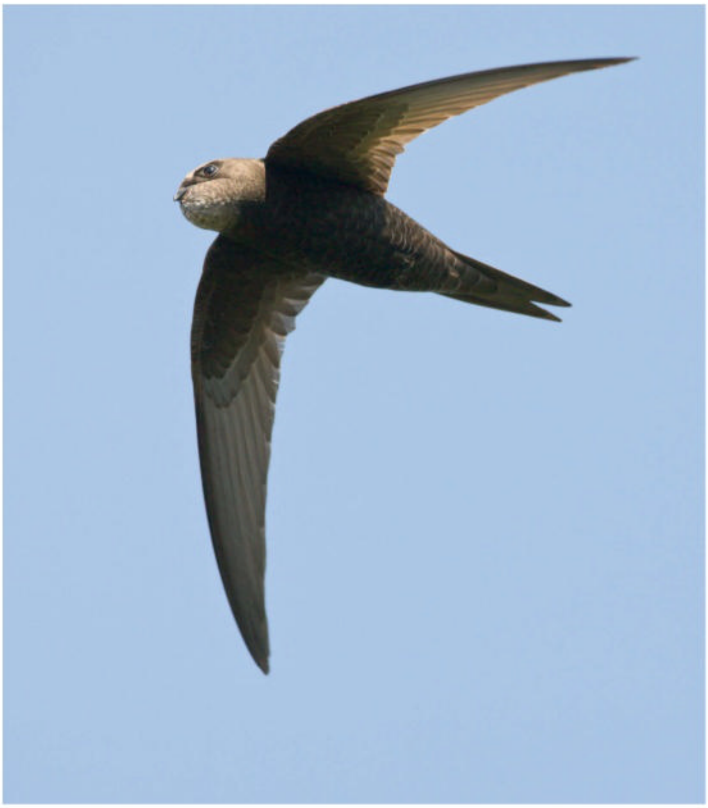
TWO: Adult Common Swift (Meers, The Netherlands, 15 June 2008). This image is a good example of how light can affect a bird's appearance. In warm sunshine, it looks more brown than black, but the overall plumage is uniform and the forehead and throat patches are small and lack prominence. In terms of structure, the rear body looks typically narrow and the tail fork is also slim, while the outer wing looks slim and very pointed.


STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

THREE: Adult Pallid Swift (Seaforth, Lancs, 6 May 2009). This looks like a subtly but genuinely paler bird than above, even though viewed against the light. The forehead and throat patches are hard to see at this angle but the underbody is clearly very scaled. As for structure, this bird looks convincingly broad bodied and solid, with a broad rear body behind the wings, while the outer wing looks subtly broader than on Common Swift.

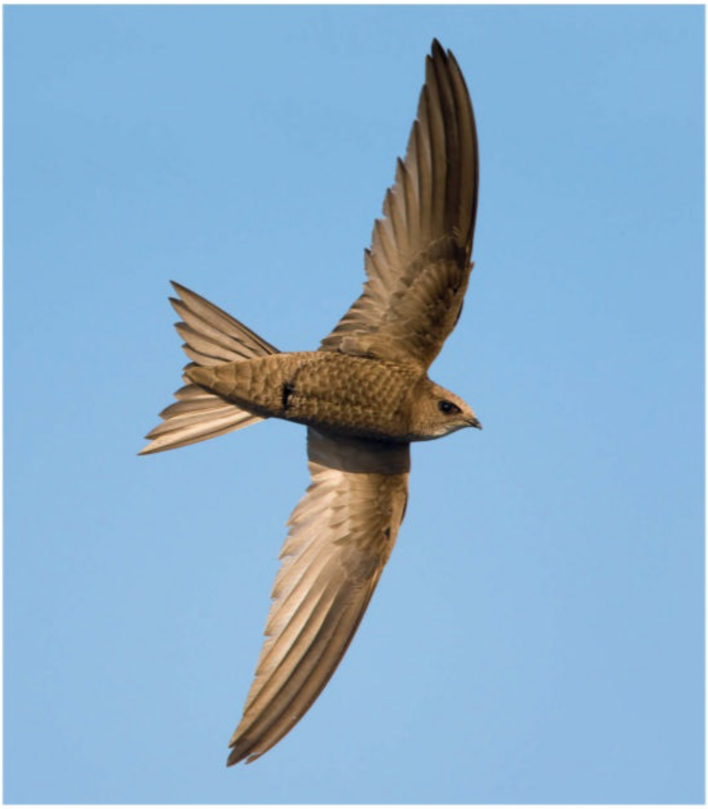

BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

FOUR: Adult Common Swift (Lower Layham, Suffolk, 15 July 2005). The camera has caught this bird while banking, thereby giving a misleading impression of a somewhat broad-bodied and broad-winged structure. In terms of plumage, the bird is uniformly dark and sooty with no hint of milky brown hues, and the throat patch is both tiny and lacking in contrast.



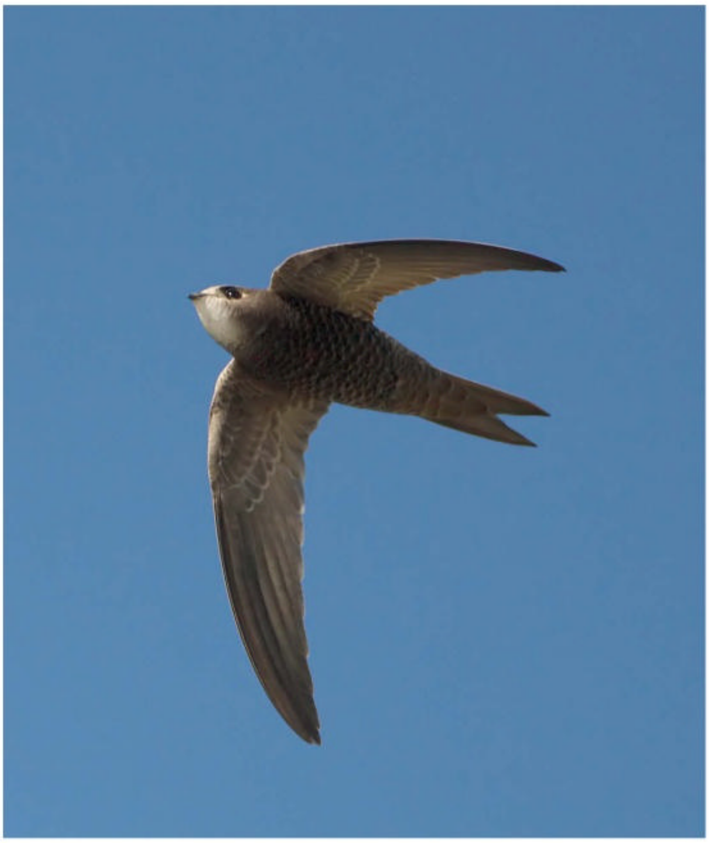
RAN SCHOLS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FIVE: Adult Common Swift (Meers, The Netherlands, 9 June 2008). This bird appears broad headed and therefore Pallid Swift-like, but merely has inflated its throat feathers, exaggerating their prominence. It is also scaled below, again inviting confusion with Pallid Swift, but it is a dark blackish bird with a slim rear body and a very slim, pointed outer wing. With relaxed throat feathers it will look just like the Common Swift it is.



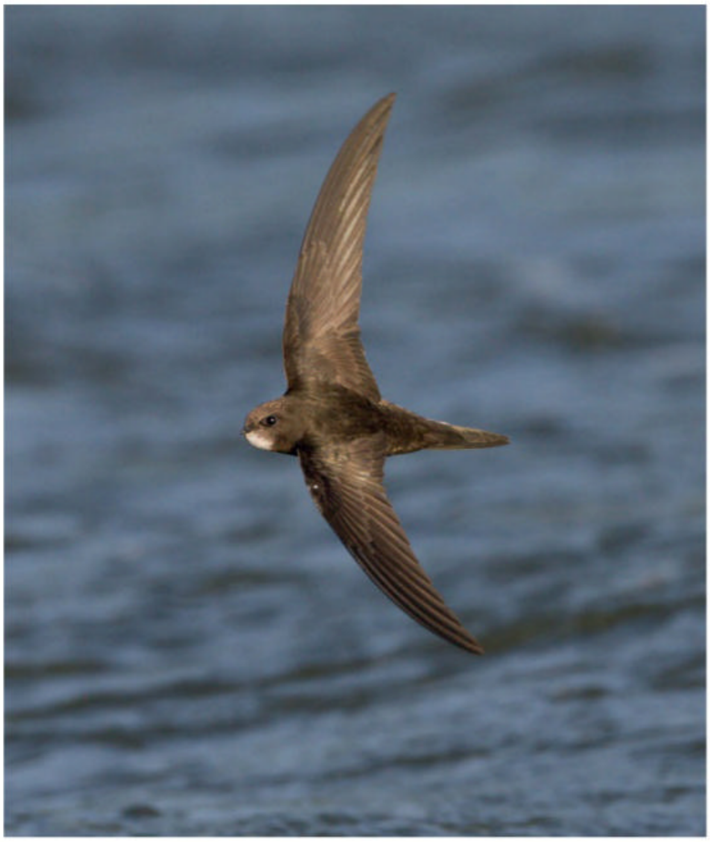
DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

SIX: Pallid Swift (Amato, Italy, 23 August 2008). This beautiful portrait shows off the features of Pallid Swift to perfection. The outer wing can be seen to be rather broad and the wing-tip somewhat blunt. The throat patch is very extensive and diffuse, while the underparts are strongly scaled. Overall it is a beautiful pale milk chocolate colour. If only all Pallid Swifts could be seen this well!



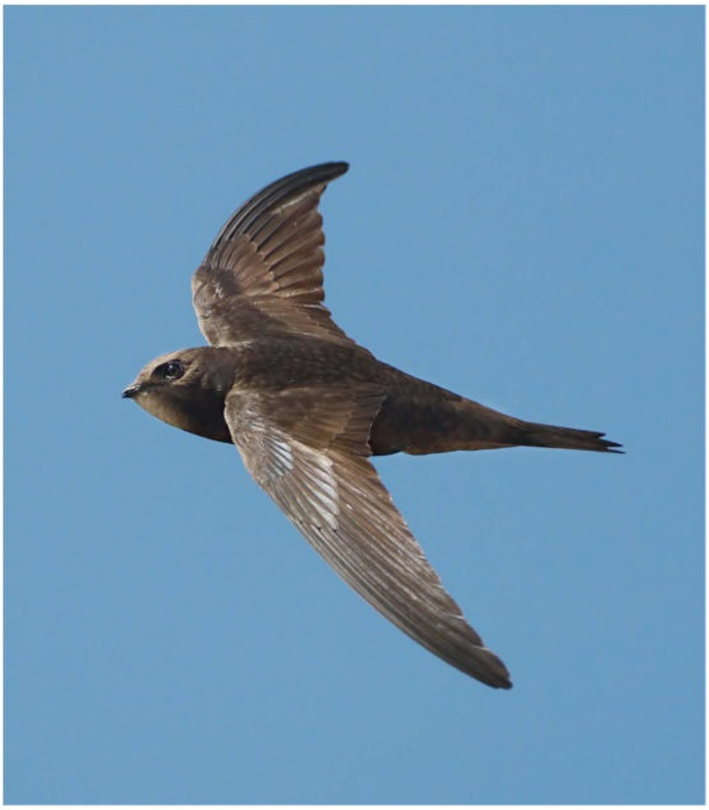
GEORGE RESZETER

SEVEN: Pallid Swift (Ronda, Spain, 15 June 2008). Though superficially similar to the bird in photo 5, this individual looks chunkier in the body, especially behind the wing, and the tail fork looks broad. The outer wing is also suitably broad and blunt ended. To add to our confidence that it is a Pallid Swift, it is very strongly scaled below and its throat patch is massively white and diffuse.

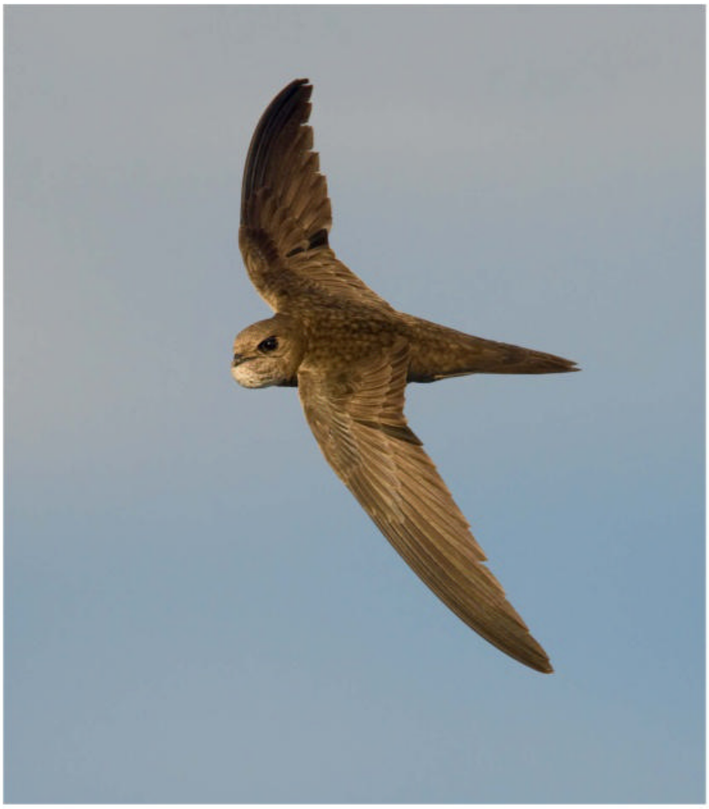


RAN SCHOLS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

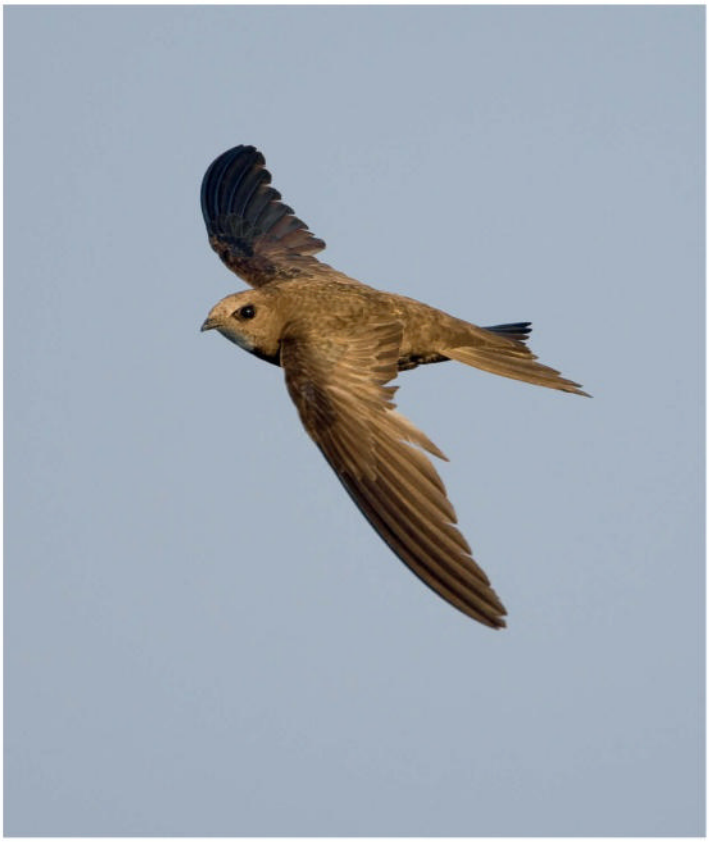
EIGHT: Adult Common Swift (Meers, The Netherlands, 15 June 2008). With a small-headed appearance and blackish plumage, this is a clear-cut Common Swift. The white throat is prominent but is neither very extensive nor diffuse. Note that the apparent contrasts above are caused by light reflecting as the bird turns. The outer wing here looks convincingly narrow and pointed, as does the rear body and tail.


GEORGE RESZETER

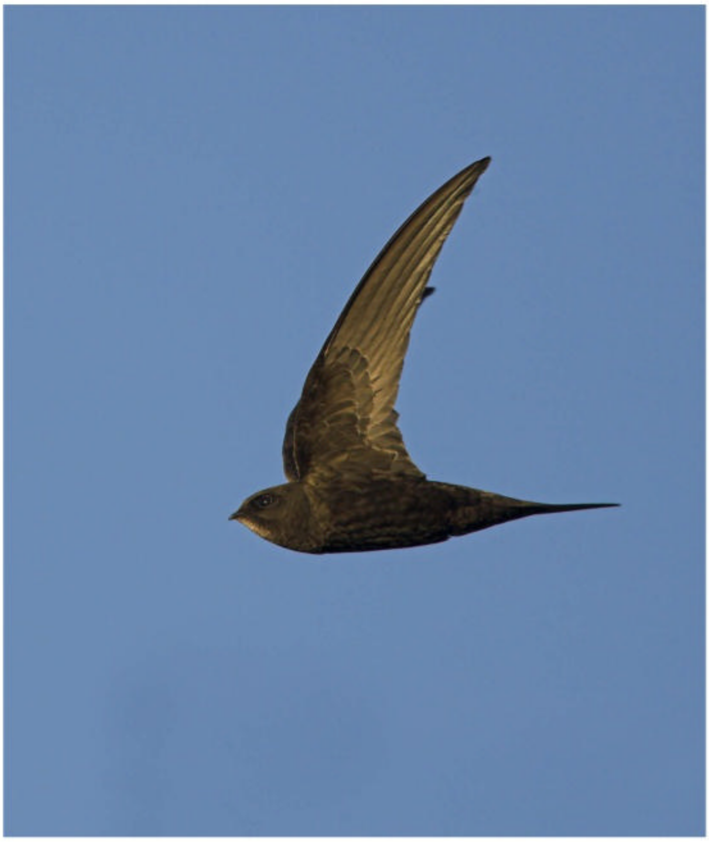
NINE: Adult Common Swift (Farmoor Reservoir, Oxon, 16 June 2008). With a pointed wing-tip, dark, ashy plumage and minimal throat patch, this bird looks immediately like a Common Swift, and the slim rear body and tail reinforce this impression. The contrasts in the upperparts, including an apparently dark saddle, are light-induced artefacts. The wing should also look uniform, but light and wear have created an illusion of contrast.


DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

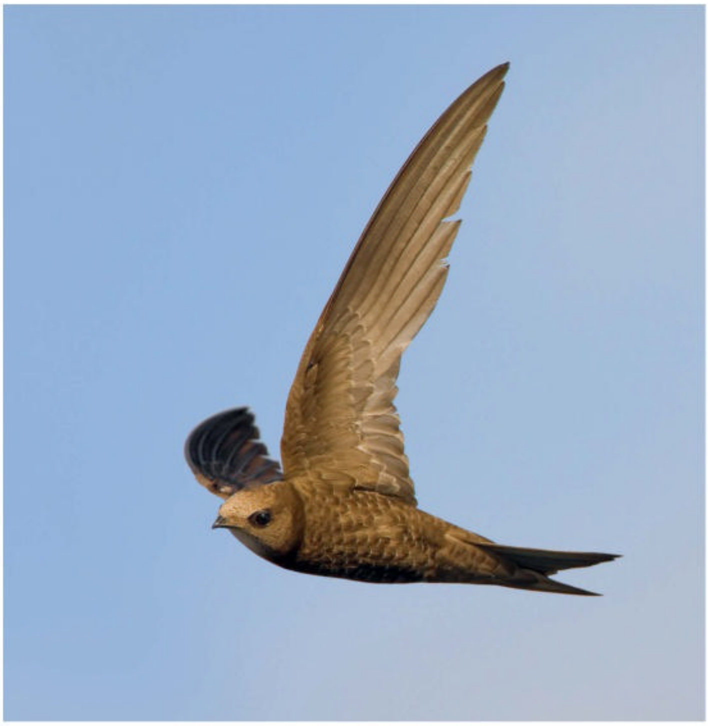
TEN: Adult Pallid Swift (Amato, Italy, 21 August 2008). In a similar pose, this Pallid Swift looks genuinely broader headed (even allowing for its inflated throat). It is also broader in the outer wing, rear body and tail, while the lighting is sufficiently good for us to be confident that the subtly darker mantle, wing coverts and outer primaries are genuine features.


DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

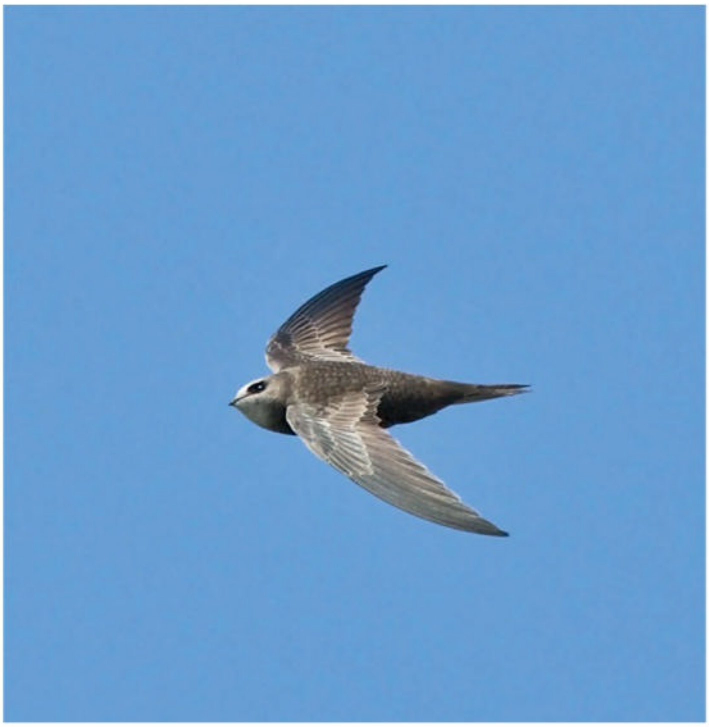
ELEVEN: Adult Pallid Swift (Amato, Italy, 23 August 2008). This bird's pale milky brown plumage tones immediately catch the eye – no Common Swift should look as pale as this. The throat patch is large and diffuse, the outer wing is blunt and broad and there is an indication of a contrast between the outer primaries and the inner wing; further observation of this bird should reveal its true upperpart contrasts.


MENNO VAN DUIJN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

TWELVE: Adult Common Swift (Oegstgeest, The Netherlands, 18 May 2009). This individual is an easy identification – small headed, slim winged and slim bodied, especially behind the wing. The throat patch is also small and discrete, not large and diffuse. The underparts are plain and show little scaling. A bird looking like this and seen this well should present no identification problems at all.


DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

THIRTEEN: Pallid Swift (Amato, Italy, 21 August 2008). The plumage hues are shown perfectly, the outer wing, rear body and tail fork structure are shown beautifully and it has lovely underpart scaling and a large and diffuse throat patch. There is also a good suggestion of the species' broad-headed appearance, though this is best appreciated when head on.


JOHN CARTER

FOURTEEN: Pallid Swift (Kessingland, Suffolk, 2 April 2010). This single image gives conflicting impressions. The camera has captured a broad-bodied look, an extensive and diffuse white throat and a contrasting dark mantle but the rest of the bird looks a dark ashy grey, the wing-tip looks quite pointed and the tail rather slim. It is always necessary to consider the whole range of structural and plumage characters from prolonged field views. In this case the grey hues are a photographic artefact, while the true structural characters are not shown to best effect.

## Find your own Common and Pallid Swifts

Common Swift is, of course, one of our commonest summer migrants and can be seen almost anywhere in Britain and Ireland. Though most built-up areas will have a colony of the species, particularly in the suburbs, there are notable breeding aggregations around the country; a small colony uses woodpecker holes and nestboxes at Loch Garten RSPB, Highland, and a long-term study colony is at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History tower (SP 153068), having been surveyed since 1947. The species often forms large, screaming congregations numbering in their thousands at the end of the breeding season and on migration, and any of these should be checked for rarer species, as should any lone swift seen late in the year.

Pallid Swift has been recorded in all months between March and November, but the peak occurrences are in October, with smaller peaks in May and November. Since the first Biritish record in May 1978 at Stodmarsh, Kent, the species has been increasingly frequently recorded, but there have been notable influx years in 1999, 2001, 2004 and 2005. Reflecting the peak occurrences, two thirds of records were of juveniles/first-winters, where the age was known.

The vast majority of Pallid Swift sightings are from the south and east coasts of England, from Scilly to Northumberland; in addition to these two counties, Kent, Suffolk, Norfolk and East Yorkshire have a healthy number of records, mostly from established migration hot-spots.

Spurn (TA 399108), East Yorkshire, has an enviable reputation for turning up rare swifts, including multiple Pacific Swift records, and heavy movements of Common Swift in late summer should be scanned for Alpine, Pallid or Little. In fact, most Pallid records are from coastal watchpoints, but that doesn't mean that inland gatherings should be ignored. Portland (SY 680687), Dorset, also has large flocks heading south in autumn, and many reservoirs will hold swarms of swifts and hirundines in late summer and early autumn.

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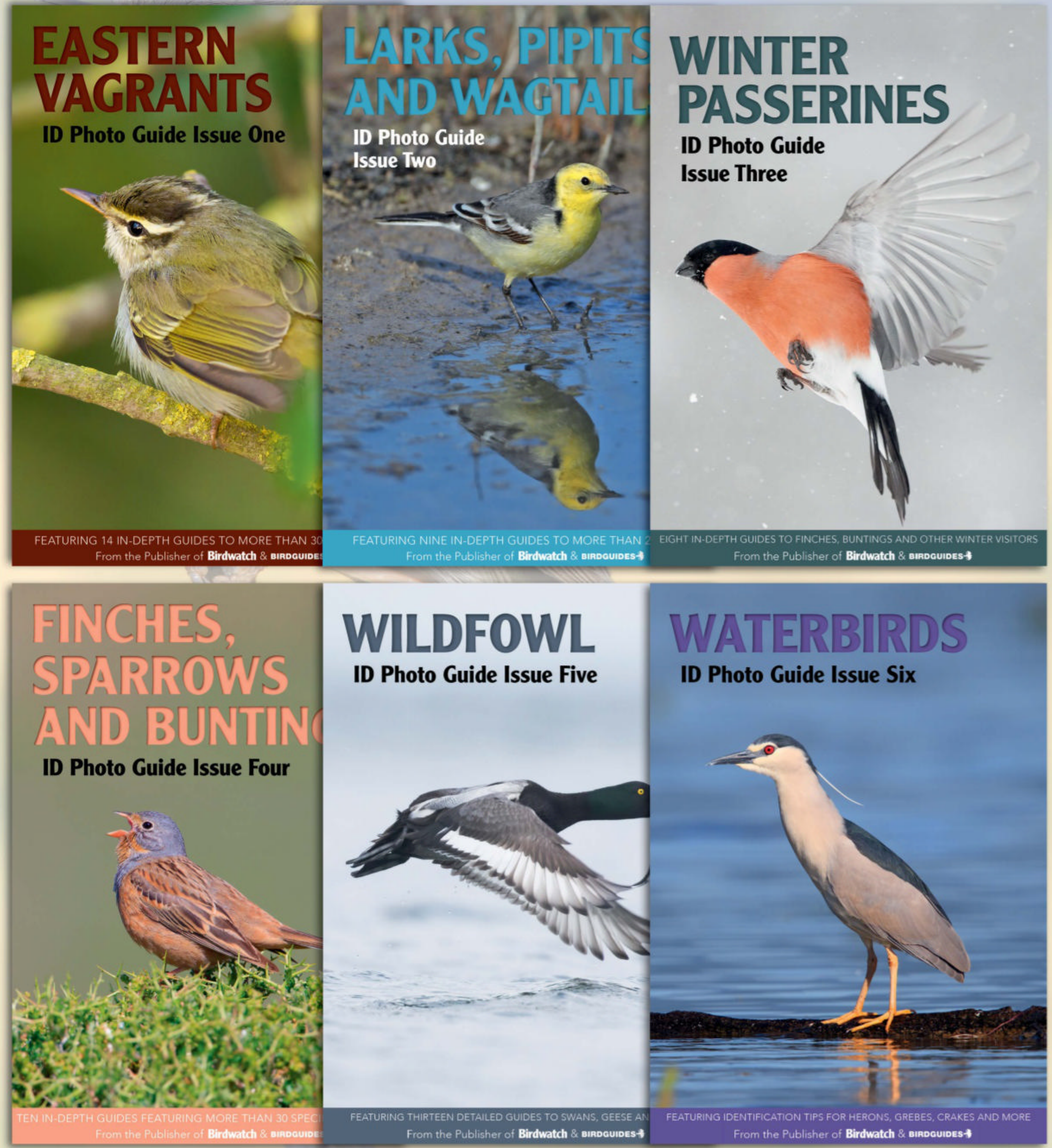
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